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SEXUALITY EDUCATION: ISSUES FOR THE 1990's*

DEBRA HAFFNER**

I am delighted to be here today. At the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), we take a very strong position on adults' rights of access to sexually explicit materials for personal use, diligently working to oppose legislative and judicial efforts that would outlaw the production or distribution of sexually explicit materials. For this reason, I am also delighted to be a member of the Working Group.¹

For those of you who are not familiar with SIECUS, we are a twenty-nine-year-old national organization dedicated to affirming that sexuality is a natural and healthy part of life. I think that our mission says a great deal about American culture. The head of the American Lung Association does not need to begin speeches by telling you that breathing is a natural and healthy part of life. In fact, however, sexuality is even more innate than breathing. Fifteen weeks into my pregnancy, I had an amniocentesis and discovered that I was carrying a boy. What was most interesting to me was that my son had a full erection during the entire test—he would not have lung capacity until eight-and-a-half months.

When Leanne Katz² invited me to speak today, she asked me to tell you, in essence, everything I knew about sexuality education and censorship in fifteen minutes. That had a familiar ring, but I couldn't figure out why for a while. Then I realized—and Leanne, I apologize!—that that is exactly what the Eagle Forum³ says. Phyllis Schlafly, the head of the Eagle Forum, has said that she supports sex education but that, in her view, the facts of life can be told in fifteen minutes.⁴ Nevertheless, I will try to outline for you where we stand in

* This article was adapted from a speech given at the Sex Panic: A Conference on Women, Censorship, and "Pornography," May 7-8, 1993.

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1. The Working Group on Women, Censorship, and "Pornography" is a committee of the National Coalition Against Censorship.

2. Executive Director, National Coalition Against Censorship.

3. The Eagle Forum is a conservative group chaired by Phyllis Schlafly. See generally Alan E. Gambrell & Leslie M. Kantor, *SIECUS Fact Sheet # 4, On Comprehensive Sexuality Education: The Far Right and Fear-Based Abstinence-Only Programs*, SIECUS REP., Dec. 1992/Jan. 1993, at 16, 17 (listing Eagle Forum as one of several organizations with agendas that include opposition to comprehensive sexuality education).

4. *Id.* at 17.

this country with respect to sexuality education, what progress we have made, and what I think are our biggest problems.

The good news is that forty-seven states now recommend or require sexuality education in their public schools,⁵ while *all* of the states either recommend or require education on preventing the spread of HIV.⁶ These figures are buttressed by various surveys, which reveal that large majorities of young people receive some form of sex education while they are in school.⁷ And several evaluations indicate that programs to raise the skill levels of sex educators are becoming increasingly effective.⁸

This is a tremendous change. When I started out in the field, only one state, Maryland, mandated sexuality education.⁹ As recently as 1985, only two states did so.¹⁰

And that's not all. SIECUS has organized the National Coalition to Support Sexuality Education (NCSSE), which now has affiliated with it eighty-four of the most mainstream groups in America, from the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, and the American Nurses Association, to the National Council of Churches. NCSSE is a coalition of more than eighty national health, education, and youth-serving organizations that advocate comprehensive sexuality education for children. These groups have gone on record as supporting a mission of comprehensive sexuality education for all young people. So, in terms of recognition by policymakers that young people need a certain amount of information, we have come a long way.

5. See ALAN E. GAMBRELL & DEBRA HAFFNER, UNFINISHED BUSINESS: A SIECUS ASSESSMENT OF STATE SEXUALITY EDUCATION PROGRAMS 13 (1993) (reporting the results of a fifty-state survey of sexuality education in public schools). See also Nancy Gibbs, *How Should We Teach Our Children About Sex?*, TIME, May 24, 1993, at 60.

6. PATTI O. BRITTON ET AL., FUTURE DIRECTIONS: HIV/AIDS EDUCATION IN THE NATION'S SCHOOLS 11 (n.d.) (reporting the results of a 1992 survey by SIECUS).

7. See Joy Overbeck, *Sex Too Soon*, PARENTS' MAG., Sept. 1994, at 42 (reporting that 86% of the nation's schools teach sexuality education). See also Freya L. Sonenstein & Karen J. Pitman, *The Availability of Sex Education in Large City School Districts*, FAMILY PLAN. PERSP., Jan./Feb. 1984, at 19, 19 (reporting that 85% of students in school districts in cities with populations over 100,000 received some form of sex education).

8. See, e.g., Ronald Moglia, *The Professional Preparation of Sexuality Educators*, SIECUS REP., Dec. 1989/Jan. 1990, at 13, 14-15 (discussing a study of sex education conducted by the Alan Guttmacher Institute).

9. See DEBRA W. HAFFNER, SEX EDUCATION 2000: A CALL TO ACTION 15 (1990). The relevant Maryland citation is MD. STATE BD. OF EDUC. BY-LAW 720 § 3(4) (1967).

10. See GAMBRELL & HAFFNER, *supra* note 5, at 13 (listing Maryland and New Jersey as states mandating sexuality education). See also MD. STATE BD. OF EDUC. BY-LAW 720 § 3(4) (1967); N.J. STATE BD. OF EDUC. N.J.A.C. 6:29-7.1 (1980).

The bad news is that, as we at SIECUS estimate, less than ten percent of young people are actually receiving anything that even approaches the quality of education that we think they have a right to receive.¹¹ Worse, opponents of sexuality education have become more strategic, and much more successful in their efforts than they ever used to be.¹²

If you go back twenty-five or thirty years, when SIECUS was founded, several groups existed that fought against sexuality education. One of them, the John Birch Society, organized a crusade that, as some of you may remember, was called MOTOREDE.¹³ MOTOREDE stood for the Movement to Restore Decency in Education. This group published an anti-SIECUS, anti-sexuality education manual entitled *Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Sex?*¹⁴

That kind of crude, bungling approach was characteristic of the Far Right (or whatever we called them back then) until the mid-eighties. That is, until about 1985, our opponents were unabashedly censorship-oriented. Their message was straightforward: "We don't want any sexuality education in our schools." Or, as I remember from being picketed in places where I spoke, "Keep smut out of our schools."

Tactics such as those cannot work any longer. As the polls indicate, close to ninety percent of parents want their children to receive

11. See DEBRA W. HAFNER & DIANE DE MAURO, WINNING THE BATTLE: DEVELOPING SUPPORT FOR SEXUALITY AND HIV/AIDS EDUCATION 31 (1991) (reporting that less than 10% of teens receive sex education in programs lasting a minimum of 40 hours; that sexuality education topics are most likely introduced in the ninth or tenth grade as part of a discussion of another subject; and that even when programs include discussion of HIV/AIDS, it is generally presented as one more negative consequence of sexual behavior).

12. See generally Leslie M. Kantor, *Scared Chaste? Fear-Based Educational Curricula*, SIECUS REP., Dec. 1992/Jan. 1993, at 1, 1 ("There has been a recent proliferation of sexuality education curricula that rely upon fear and shame to discourage students from engaging in sexual behavior."); Jill Smolowe, *Crusade for the Classroom*, TIME, Nov. 1, 1993, at 34, 34-35 (describing conservative strategy to focus on state and local issues and races).

13. See Kerry Dougherty, *Fervor and Ferment Over Sex Education*, WASH. POST, May 22, 1980, at 1, 6 (Virginia Weekly) (describing MOTOREDE's campaign to prevent sex education).

14. GORDON V. DRAKE, IS THE SCHOOL HOUSE THE PROPER PLACE TO TEACH RAW SEX? (1968).

sexuality education within a school program.¹⁵ So the Far Right changed its strategy.

The Far Right has come up with its own brand of sexuality education. SIECUS has named the result "fear-based education," because the programs are designed to control young people's behavior by instilling fear, shame, and guilt.¹⁶ The essence of these programs is that they teach teens only about abstinence, withholding any information about birth control, sexual pleasure, or safe sex.

In the past two school years, including 1992-1993, SIECUS has identified close to one hundred communities in thirty-four states where sex education battles have raged.¹⁷ These battles involve sexuality education curricula that have been proposed by forces aligned with the Far Right. The programs feature several common characteristics.

The first common feature is to scare young people into being chaste. In a moment, I'm going to read to you from one of the proposed curricula, called *Facing Reality*, about what supposedly happens to you if you have premarital sex. While I read this, I would like you to think about the fact that, if this audience is like national audiences, at least eighty percent of us in this room had intercourse before we were married.¹⁸

When you have premarital sex, according to *Facing Reality*, you put yourself at risk of:

[P]regnancy, fear of pregnancy, AIDS, guilt, herpes, disappointing parents, chlamydia, inability to concentrate on school, syphilis, embarrassment, abortion, shotgun wedding, gonorrhea, selfishness, pelvic inflammatory disease, heartbreak, infertility, loneliness, cervical cancer, poverty, loss of self-esteem, loss of reputation, being used, suicide, substance abuse, melancholy, loss of faith, possessiveness, diminished ability to communicate, isolation, fewer friendships formed, rebellion against other familial standards, alienation, loss of self-mastery,

15. See Louis Harris & Assocs., Inc., *Public Attitudes About Sex Education, Family Planning, and Abortion in the United States*, AMERICA SPEAKS (Planned Parenthood Fed'n of Am., New York, N.Y.), Aug.-Sept. 1985, at 4, 7 (showing that 85% of surveyed parents agree that sex education should be taught in public schools).

16. See Kantor, *supra* note 12, at 2-4.

17. See *id.* at 1.

18. See, e.g., Jon Nordheimer, *For Lovers, No. 1 Activity These Days Is Worrying*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 12, 1992, at C1, C10 (noting that Dr. June Reinisch, director of the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research, reported that 90% of young women today had intercourse before marriage).

distrust of complementary sex, viewing others as sex objects, difficulty with long-term commitments, various other sexually transmitted diseases, aggressions toward women, ectopic pregnancy, sexual violence, loss of a sense of responsibility toward others, loss of honesty, jealousy, depression, [and] death.¹⁹

I think that many of these purported risks would come as a surprise to many of us. But that is how the Far Right tries to educate young people. It does not work, of course, because even if they have not done so themselves, kids these days know plenty of people who have had sexual intercourse and who have not suffered from melancholia, suicide, or substance abuse.

Another common characteristic of the curricula is that they omit all information on condoms or contraception, or—worse, perhaps—when they do include such information, they exaggerate the failure rates of various contraceptive devices. In addition, the programs are racist,²⁰ classist,²¹ and borderline-religious²²—not to mention extremely

19. JAMES COUGHLIN, *FACING REALITY: A HANDBOOK FOR HEALTHY LIVING* (Parent/Teacher Guide) 24 (Project Respect, 1990).

20. See Kantor, *supra* note 12, at 13 (noting that people of color are rarely depicted in illustrations within the curricula and that cultural and class biases are evident in the scenarios, which tend to depict middle-class individuals and activities).

21. See *id.*; see also TEEN-AID, INC., *ME, MY WORLD, MY FUTURE* 133 (Nancy Roach & LeAnna Benn eds., 1993) (inviting parents to screen their children's potential dating partners for "age, religious affiliation, economic background, educational background or aspirations, ethnic background, [and] peer group").

22. See, e.g., ANNE E. NESBIT, *LAMO: LEARNING ABOUT MYSELF AND OTHERS—GUIDE II—GRADES 3 AND 4*, at 17 (3d ed. 1989) (suggesting that parents, "in line with [their] religious beliefs," explain the beauty and splendor of the human body: "You might wish to rephrase the teaching as set forth in Genesis."); ANNE E. NESBIT, *LAMO: LEARNING ABOUT MYSELF AND OTHERS—GUIDE III—GRADES 5 AND 6*, at 40 (4th ed. 1991) ("Depending on your religious beliefs, you might choose to discuss: the extreme importance of prayer as a weapon against temptation; . . . original sin and subsequent rise of shame and concupiscence . . .").

homophobic.²³ They often talk only about the nuclear family, and all other kinds of families are presented as dysfunctional.²⁴

The sexist aspect of these curricula deserves special mention. The message to young women in all the programs is that a normal girl is non-sexual while a normal boy is sexually aggressive and manipulative. Indeed, the bottom line is that teenage boys are always turned on, and that the teenage girl's job is to prevent things from getting out of hand.²⁵

Those of us who are women and grew up in the fifties and sixties remember that message all too well. Reproduction often occupies the whole of the discussion of sexuality. When the programs discuss female anatomy, they discuss only reproductive anatomy. And the missing link in the vast majority of them is the clitoris; in many of the diagrams, no clitorises are even drawn, as if female sexual pleasure did not exist.²⁶

You might think this could be some kind of unintended omission. But it is not. In Shreveport, Louisiana, one parent stood up at a school board meeting and said that she agreed her daughter needed to know about

23. See, e.g., COUGHLIN, *supra* note 19, at 19 (noting that although it is not within the proper purview of any teacher to "subjectively judge" people who identify themselves as homosexual, "[t]o objectively discuss the wisdom of certain choices certainly is. A promiscuous lifestyle is an unhealthy lifestyle, regardless of the sex of one's partners." (emphasis added)); TERRANCE D. OLSON & CHRISTOPHER M. WALLACE, *FAMILIES, DECISION-MAKING AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY RESOURCE GUIDE FOR TEACHING DECISION-MAKING* 161 (1990) ("While there is much that is not known for certain about homosexuality, [one fact that is known is that] [w]hile many homosexuals have achieved success in a wide variety of fields, there are many serious emotional, psychological, social and moral adversities which homosexuals encounter.").

24. See Kantor, *supra* note 12, at 9 (noting that judgmental statements are commonly made about divorced and single-parent families).

25. See, e.g., COLEEN K. MAST, *SEX RESPECT—THE OPTION OF TRUE SEXUAL FREEDOM: A PUBLIC HEALTH GUIDE FOR PARENTS* (1986):

Boys tend to use love to get sex. Girls tend to use sex to get love. . . . [A m]ale's thinking about the opposite sex tends to focus on the sexual organs, their own and those of their imagined partner. Females, when they visualize a sex partner—I should say *love* partner—think not of the male's genitals, but rather of his whole body as an instrument for giving them warmth, closeness, and security. . . . [This difference] helps girls cope with the sexual aggressiveness of boys. It helps them be more level-headed about sex. It helps them make a less emotional choice of a partner when they do want a permanent relationship.

Id. at 4.

26. See Kantor, *supra* note 12, at 11 (detailing many programs' omissions of depictions of external female genitalia); see also TEEN-AID, INC., *supra* note 21, at 68 (diagramming female anatomy but omitting clitoris).

anatomy, but that her daughter did not need to know about her clitoris until she was married.

Again, the message in these fear-based curricula is that girls have few, if any, sexual feelings. About half of the programs, in fact, feature a so-called "Sexual Response Scale," which shows that while girls are not aroused until heavy petting, boys can get turned on merely by kissing.²⁷ The message to teens is that girls use love for warmth and closeness, but boys use love only to get sex.

It gets worse. Not only do the programs ignore female sexuality, they reinforce traditional stereotypes and gender roles, especially those involving family functioning. One of the curricula, entitled *Me, My World, My Future*, which is published by an outfit called Teen-Aid,²⁸ offers a role-playing exercise that begins, "You pick up the telephone to talk to the operator, but your voice is so high that she thinks you're a girl. She says, 'Yes, Ma'am.' That may be the worst insult that's ever been thrown at you!"²⁹ The exercise proceeds to help that young man deal with his feelings. That, we are to understand, is the most urgent challenge facing a boy today.

In sum, the curricula proposed by the Far Right teach what Sol Gordon has only half-jokingly identified as the American attitude toward sex, namely, "Sex is dirty, save it for someone you love."³⁰

In addition to all the energy that is wasted on fighting these struggles, fear-based education has spawned an epidemic of self-censorship. Teachers, principals, and administrators are scared to teach honestly about sexuality. What we get are curricula that ostensibly are not based on fear, but that, in fact, were conceived from the start in an atmosphere of fear. They have been self-censored. Typically, four issues—the Big Four, as we call them at SIECUS—are absent from any discussion in these curricula: contraception, masturbation, abortion, and sexual orientation.

SIECUS did a study in 1992 of AIDS education programs around the country,³¹ and we found that only three states presented the subject

27. In *Sex Respect*, for example, a chart lists the stages of "sexual arousal": "Being Together"; "Hand Holding"; "Simple Good Night Kiss"; "Prolonged Kiss"; "Necking"; "Petting"; "Heavy Petting"; "Mutual Sex Play"; "Sexual Intercourse"; and "End of Relationship in its Present Form." The stage of Prolonged Kiss marks the "beginning of danger." "Male Genital [F]eeling [A]roused" occurs at "Necking," while "Female Genital [F]eeling [A]roused" occurs at "Petting." MAST, *supra* note 25, at 4.

28. See TEEN-AID, INC., *supra* note 21.

29. *Id.* at 39.

30. See Gibbs, *supra* note 5, at 62 (quoting Gordon, who is a clinical psychologist, author and sex educator).

31. See BRITTON ET AL., *supra* note 6.

of AIDS in the context of a positive view of sexuality.³² Only five provided practical information on condom use,³³ and only seven accurately defined sexual orientation.³⁴ What is being taught with respect to sexuality and AIDS education is often nothing more than disaster prevention. Young people are not being taught to understand and explore pleasure. They are not being given the ability to become sexually healthy adults.

I would like to ask all of you, as you think about why you are here today, to get involved in the schools in your own communities. Too many young people in America continue to grow up with, and then adopt for themselves, attitudes of sexual illiteracy, sexual unhealth, and sexual double standards. A perfect illustration of this trend is provided by the recent Spur Posse incident in Lakewood, California, where a group of high-school boys organized a club to celebrate their sexual conquests, and where the leader garnered sixty-six partners by the time he was eighteen.³⁵ If the existence of the club were not bad enough, the reaction of the parents in the Lakewood community was appalling. In essence, their attitude was that "Boys will be boys," but that the girls were just sluts who had given it away.³⁶

So, while SIECUS can be of help in community controversies, I urge all of you to get involved in your own communities. In the meantime, I congratulate you all, from my heart. I think that the work that the Coalition is doing is fabulous. It is part of what we most need to do, in order to assure that we will live in a world where all people—regardless of age, regardless of gender, regardless of sexual orientation, and regardless of ability—can celebrate their sexuality, and make responsible sexual choices.

32. *Id.* at 29-31 (listing Massachusetts, New Jersey and South Carolina as having exemplary AIDS education programs).

33. *Id.* at 8 (listing California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, South Carolina, and Washington as states providing practical information on condom use).

34. *Id.* (listing Hawaii, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Jersey, North Carolina, North Dakota, and Vermont as the only states accurately defining sexual orientation).

35. See Jane Gross, *Where 'Boys Will Be Boys,' And Adults Are Befuddled*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 29, 1993, at A1 (discussing the Spur Posse members' views regarding their sexual exploits and their parents' reactions).

36. See *id.* at A13 (quoting one parent of a Spur Posse founder).