



Parents, Schools Divided as Sex Ed Controversy Erupts

OMAHA, Nebraska -- Rival factions yelling at one another amid angry pushing. Tirades about condoms, and claims of misinformation. A parent declaring that children are being force-fed course material “straight from the pits of hell.”

Such has been the tenor of recent school board meetings in Omaha as board members contemplate the first update in three decades of the school district’s sex education curriculum.

A public meeting in October ended in chaos after shouting and shoving broke out between supporters and opponents of the update who had packed by the hundreds into an auditorium. This month, as board members sat in stoic silence, activists from both sides vented their feelings during three hours of public comment - reflecting divisions that have bedeviled school boards nationwide, as well as state legislatures and even Congress.

Kathryn Russell, a grandmother who formerly worked for the Omaha school district, said the proposed curriculum “rapes children of their innocence.” It was another critic in Omaha, Jesse Martinez, who used the “pits of hell” reference, calling elements of the course material “garbage.”

Supporters of the update - ranging from the president of the city council to students who spoke - exhorted the school board to equip students with reliable information that would help the Omaha region lower rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases that are above the national average.

“I have a right to this information,” said Ryleigh Welsh, a sophomore at Omaha’s Central High School. “Sexual health is more than just sex. It’s about understanding and taking care of your body and being prepared for a healthy future.”

In Omaha, as in many U.S. communities, some parents and conservative activists insist that any school-based sex education emphasize sexual abstinence as the wisest course. Yet as more young people turn to social media and online resources - including pornography- for sex-related information, there’s pressure on schools from other quarters to offer accurate, candid information that can compete with and correct what’s available beyond the classroom.

“The notion that sex education is limited to what happens in school is an antiquated one,” said Bill Albert, chief program officer of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. It is one of several organizations that’s developing online sex education to supplement school-based programs.

Quality online programming “is not buffeted by political fights over what teens can and should learn,” Albert said. “It allows for real-time modifications and updates, it offers anonymity, and it meets teens where they are, which increasingly is in front of screens.”

In Omaha, school board president Lou Ann Goding said one of the motivations for updating the sex-ed curriculum is to counter misinformation that students might encounter outside of school.

“There’s so much social media and other sources that they can go to that are not always reliable,” Goding said.

Several of the update supporters who spoke at the Jan. 4 public meeting echoed this concern. Among them were fourth graders Samantha Bourne and Hadley Forsen, who said they already were getting “nonfactual” information from their friends on sex-related topics.

“We need help to learn this curriculum at this age,” said the girls, reading their statement in unison. “This will be way too embarrassing for us to ask our parents when we’re older.”

Decades of controversy

Sex education in America has a long and checkered history, winning the backing of the U.S. Public Health Service in 1940, gaining traction in the 1980s during the early years of the AIDS epidemic, but generating steady opposition from social conservatives.

Omaha Public Schools, which serves about 52,000 students in its district, has taught sex education since 1986 as part of a course called Human Growth and Development. The process that’s been underway since early last year marks the first comprehensive review of the course.

Abstinence is encouraged in the curriculum, which also covers such topics as reproductive anatomy, pregnancy prevention and sexually transmitted diseases.

As initially proposed, the updates would add discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in 7th and 8th grades, and discussion of abortion and emergency contraception in 10th-grade lessons on birth control.

The school district conducted a telephone survey of about 1,500 parents last year, and reported that a sizable majority supported adding those topics to the curriculum. But the margins of support for the abortion and emergency contraception components were smaller than for other topics, and school officials now plan to omit them.

Over the course of 2015, some churches and other groups began to circulate criticisms and warnings about the district's plans. Spearheading the opposition is a conservative Christian group, Nebraskans for Founders' Values, which has held briefings at local churches and encouraged skeptical citizens - whether public school parents or not - to attend school board meetings to vent their displeasure.

Comprehensive sex education "is pornography under the guise of education," the group contends. "The values that it promotes are ones that most parents would never agree with."

Many of the opponents' allegations have been categorically denied by the school district, including claims that the new curriculum was designed by Planned Parenthood, would authorize school staff to take students to get abortions, and would provide them with birth control.

Goding, the board president, said countering inaccurate criticisms has been a challenge.

"Once the misinformation has been disseminated, it's hard to gather it back up," she said.

Board members stress that none of the sex-ed courses will be mandatory - parents must opt their children into the classes offered in 4th, 5th and 6th grade, and can keep them out of the classes in middle school and high school. Topics for 4th graders include puberty and how to stay safe from sexual abuse; by middle school students are learning about methods of contraception.

The board plans to vote on new standards for the sex-ed program on Jan. 20, then work on details of a new curriculum in time for any changes to be implemented next fall. Some opponents have urged the board to hold off on implementation until parents can review the final version of the proposed curriculum.

Sex education is taught in varied forms and under different rules across the 50 states.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 22 states and the District of Columbia require public schools to teach sex education. In other states, including Nebraska, it's generally up to individual school districts to decide what form of sex education, if any, is offered. In 35 states, parents are allowed to keep their children out of sex-ed classes.

In some states, there have been recent steps to ensure that the sex-ed curriculum includes positive instruction about different sexual orientations and gender identities, and to address sexual harassment and violence.

There's no detailed nationwide breakdown of how the 13,500 school districts in the U.S. handle sex education, although the Centers for Disease Control compiles partial data.

Its latest report, with data from 2014, suggests that programs in a substantial majority of school districts stress the benefits of sexual abstinence, while a smaller portion offer instruction in high school about usage of specific contraceptive methods, including condoms and emergency contraception.

In most of the U.S., fewer than half of high schools and only a fifth of middle schools teach all 16 topics recommended by the CDC as essential components of sex education.

"Lack of effective sex education can have very real, very serious health consequences," said Dr. Stephanie Zaza, director of the CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health. "Young people who have multiple sex partners, don't use condoms, and use drugs or alcohol before sex are at higher risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections."

Leslie Kantor, vice president of education for Planned Parenthood, said the statewide policies are not a good barometer for what's happening school by school. Whether or not there was a statewide mandate, an individual district might do a good job or bad job with its course, she said.

Dr. John Santelli, an adolescent medicine specialist at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, says there has been a slight decline in the teaching of comprehensive sex education, including instruction on condom use. He finds that worrisome, citing research that casts doubt on the effectiveness of abstinence-only programs.

"There's been a decline in support for sex education at the political level," Santelli said. "People are getting fed up - they'd rather avoid the whole issue."

While the federal government has no direct role in dictating sex-education curriculum, it has influence in the form of federal funding for various programs. From 1981, the start of Ronald Reagan's administration, through 2009, such funds went predominantly to abstinence-only programs; since 2010, under President Barack Obama, abstinence funding has been reduced and larger sums appropriated for comprehensive sex-ed programs.

Rival advocacy groups lobbied hard in Congress last year to get a favorable outcome for their approach. The end result - a compromise between Democrats and Republicans - maintained annual spending at about \$100 million for the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program, which incorporates comprehensive sex education, and doubled spending from \$5 million to \$10 million to abstinence-oriented programs.

Valerie Huber of Ascend - formerly the National Abstinence Education Association - would like to see Congress move toward equal funding earmarked for comprehensive and abstinence approaches.

In the meantime, Ascend and its allies are working to scrap the term “abstinence-only,” which they felt was a detriment. They now describe their approach as “sexual risk avoidance” and contrast it with what they call a “sexual risk reduction” (SRR) approach in comprehensive sex-ed programs.

“There’s room for both, but we have to be clear they are different,” Huber said. “Our approach sends a cultural message that it’s better if teens don’t have sex; the SRR message is normalizing teen sex if the risks can be mitigated.”

According to the CDC’s latest figures, from 2013, 44 percent of female teens and 47 percent of male teens between 15 and 19 have had sexual intercourse - significantly lower than 25 years earlier, but up slightly from 2011.

Jonathan Zimmerman, a professor of education and history at New York University, worries that many adolescents are learning about sex via pornography on the Internet. Online porn and misinformation can best be countered by accurate online information, said Zimmerman, who praised initiatives that enable teens to ask questions and get answers from health educators via text message.

“It isn’t that schools shouldn’t try, but historically they’re incredibly limited in what they can do,” Zimmerman said. “We’re so divided about sexuality - so they come to the lowest common denominator.”

Planned Parenthood - a longtime advocate of comprehensive and candid sex education for adolescents - has recently developed a set of digital tools to provide sex education on mobile phones. One app is designed to help young women identify what methods of birth control would best meet their needs; two other apps emphasize the importance of using both condoms and a more effective form of birth control.

Role of parents

At the Jan. 4 meeting in Omaha, the public debate focused on whether schools or parents should be the primary sources of information on sensitive sexual topics.

Conservative activists said such subjects should be left to the parents, and suggested the school district could create a website that would assist them in that task.

“The schools could teach health risks of promiscuity,” said Dave Meyer of Nebraskans for Founders’ Values. “Parents should lead the private discussions of sexual expression.”

However, Cheri Duryea of the Women’s Fund of Omaha, which supports the update, said many parents don’t talk to their children about sex, even if the children would welcome that.

“We know that in most homes it doesn’t happen or it’s incomplete and unhelpful,” she said.

Many of the parents attending the meeting were black or Hispanic, reflecting the fact that racial minorities comprise about 70 percent of the school district’s students.

Several black civic leaders were among the supporters of the curriculum update, including the head of the Urban League of Nebraska, the president of the Douglas County Board of Health, and City Council President Ben Gray.

However, black and Hispanic activists who oppose the update were among the most vehement speakers.

Gwen Easter, a black woman who runs a community center and preschool program, assailed the proposals to teach acceptance and understanding of gay and transgender youth.

“That’s the real agenda - the same-sex stuff,” she declared during fiery remarks that drew cheers from her allies in the crowd.

Hispanic activist Amelia Den Hartog said comprehensive sex education would fuel promiscuity.

“The most important sex organ is the brain,” she said. “Please teach the students to use their brain... Let’s empower our children to say no to sex outside of marriage, teach them to have self-control. They are not animals.”

In all, more than 40 people addressed the school board, with opponents of the update outnumbering supporters roughly 2-1.

Among the opponents was Deanna Rabuck, who became widely known on social media after her comments at the stormy October meeting were captured on cellphone video and aired on local TV stations.

“I have five daughters! Five daughters! Who’s going to keep them pure?” Rabuck shouted. “I am! Not OPS!”

At the Jan. 4 meeting, Rabuck was more soft-spoken, but urged the school board to reject the updates.

“You have captured the attention of every community in Omaha,” she said. “I hope we have captured your attention as well.”

Supporters of the update included Sofia Jawed-Wessel, an assistant professor at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. She has two sons - the elder a kindergartener already coming home with questions about sex-related comments by classmates.

“We are behind the curve on this,” she said. “People are looking to us to make a good call. The country is watching.”