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An age-old struggle of morality vs. reality enters a new era

Politics, pop culture, even Me Too shift the battleground again

Parents and educators today face new challenges: the accessibility of free pornography, hypersexualization on social media and a “hook-up” culture.

For more than a century, the nation has engaged in a war over sex education in America’s schools.



Battles ignite around questions that seem practical but are decidedly moral: Should teens be given more information about sex or less? Should they be encouraged to wait until marriage? Do young people have a right to understand their sexuality, or do adults have a duty to protect them from it?

Fierce disagreement on the answers has led to a debate over the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program. The federal initiative, which began in 2010 under President Obama, offers a more comprehensive approach to sex ed, providing teens with information on both abstinence and contraception. President Trump wants to defund the program, but in the past month, three federal judges ruled to block the administration’s cuts to grants issued through the initiative.

Advocates of the program say it has a proven track record of success — the teen birth rate declined to a historic low in 2015, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and research shows more teens today are delaying sex and those that don't are using more effective contraception.

But in August, the Department of Health and Human Services said the program "had no impact or had a negative impact on teen behavior."

"Today there are two opposing forces," said Debra Hauser, president of Advocates for Youth, a national organization that says it promotes healthy teen sexuality. "There are those that want comprehensive sex education to not only help young people prevent unintended pregnancy, STDs and HIV but also to educate young people about healthy relationships and the prevention of sexual violence."

On the opposite side, she said, are proponents of abstinence-only programs who want to "promote a 'just say no' approach."

"The real issue here is what values are being taught," said Robert Rector, who wrote a 2010 report for the conservative Heritage Foundation on the benefits of abstinence-only education. Many comprehensive sex-ed programs, he said, are about "how to have a good time on Saturday night and avoid getting an STD."

Despite the Trump administration's abstinence push, sex ed may undergo even more changes in a post-Me Too era, some experts say.

"In the early 20th century, sex education began in schools out of concern for rising STD rates among our soldiers during World War I," Hauser said. It focused on biology, reproduction and "roles within the family," she said.

Over the decades, sex ed grew more robust, with more teachers trained in human sexuality. During the sexual revolution, sex ed began to focus less on the family and more on the individual, helping teens to make personal decisions about their bodies and sexual lives. It's also the decade sex ed became deeply political, Hauser said.

Battles persisted into the 1980s and 1990s, when sex ed shifted again in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. On one side there was a push, including from the U.S. surgeon general, for more comprehensive AIDS and sexuality education. On the other was a push for abstinence-only education. It was during the Obama era when more schools began to move away from abstinence-only and toward more comprehensive sex ed.

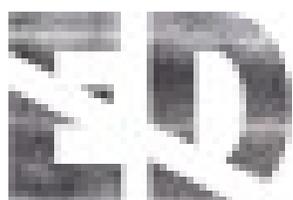
Chitra Panjabi, president of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, said Me Too lighted another "spark."

"The national conversation is certainly having a significant impact on policy, and that's a really good thing," she said, noting a slew of bills related to sex education have been introduced at state levels. "Now, whether or not these are eventually going to get passed is a different story."

Parents and educators today face new challenges. The accessibility of free pornography, hypersexualization on social media and the "myth" of hook-up culture are obstacles sex educators must overcome, said Shafia Zaloom, who teaches sex ed and develops curricula for public and private schools across the country.

Benjamin Miller, a junior at the Urban School in San Francisco, took Zaloom's course his freshman and sophomore years. He said her program addressed abstinence but focused more on healthy relationships, something Miller said was useful.

"I learned the overall importance of communication ... because it seems like no matter what sex problems people have ... one of the main things that's always lacking is communication," he said.



"It's really made my life and relationships a lot healthier."

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