

Sex Ed Silliness in Texas

By Ellen Goodman

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BOSTON -- Here it is, just days after the red states gave their presidential seal of approval to the man from Texas, and we've already been treated to another skirmish in the culture wars. The Texas Board of Education has now given its educational seal of approval to what may soon be dubbed Red Sex Ed.

The big news is the state's successful demand that textbook publishers change the description of marriage between "two people" to marriage between "a man and a woman." They also ordered that marriage be defined as "a lifelong union between a husband and a wife."

Frankly, I found the "lifelong" description charming considering that the Lone Star State has one of the highest divorce rates in the country. Massachusetts, by the way, has the lowest divorce rate in the country. We are so fond of marriage that we want everyone to do it.

But never mind all that. The real heart of the textbook controversy is whether Texas students should learn about contraception. And the answer is no.

Texas has now officially gone to abstinence-only textbooks. The students are learning the ABCs of sex education without the C. And as Texas, the second-largest book buyer in the country, goes, so may go the nation.

Only one of the four approved books even mentions contraceptives. The altered lessons teach students how to avoid sexually transmitted diseases in many ways -- including "getting plenty of rest" -- but not by using condoms. One actually suggests using latex gloves to avoid contact with blood but says nothing about using latex . . . you get the idea.

Ironically, the state curriculum for health education still mandates that students "analyze the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of barrier protection and other contraceptive methods." But the books have expunged the information they're required to learn.

In some ways this Texas story is proof of how the abstinence-only lobby is flexing its muscle. But Americans are nowhere nearly as polarized over sex education as it appears in this public wrangling.

Americans have come to some sort of uneasy understanding that sex education is not just about health but also about values. It's not just about biology but also about relationships.

As Samantha Smoot, who heads the Texas Freedom Network, which opposes textbook censorship, says, "Everyone agrees that abstinence is the best choice for teenagers. And everyone thinks books should give kids real negotiation skills and information that helps them make responsible decisions." Last summer 90 percent of Texans surveyed said they wanted teenagers to learn about both abstinence and contraception.

Americans, especially parents, believe that teenagers should delay sex even if we have trouble answering the next question: Until when? Some believe sex should be postponed until that mystical age called maturity, others until marriage. Everyone seems to hope that their own kids will wait until they're grown and gone.

But it turns out that most parents are pragmatic as well as worried. We have rules and fallback positions. We don't want our kids to drink, but we want them to call us for a ride home if they do. We don't want them to have sex, but we hope they'll use protection if they do. If that's a mixed message, it's a safety message. And it's working.

Over the past decade, teen pregnancy and births are down by about 30 percent. As a scientist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed, just about half the decrease in pregnancy comes from abstinence and half from increased contraceptive use.

Nevertheless, in Texas, which has the highest teenage birthrate in the country, an ardent minority is pushing abstinence-only information, or lack of information.

Sarah Brown, who runs the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, says that the public argument is out of step with private reality. "We know that young people spend more time engaged in the media than in school, let alone in Mrs. Schmidt's health education class," she says.

A lot of the deeper worries, she adds, are really about popular culture and its crudeness. "You don't know what to do about trash TV or stresses on the family or the latest story about hooking up or oral sex in middle school," she adds, "But you can go down to the school board and say, 'I hate these two pages.' "

So this is where we are. We have a shared agreement on the importance of teaching both abstinence and protection. We have as well a shared opposition to a culture that sells sex like doughnuts.

But in politics we see only the most polarized debate, in which we're told that we have to choose between A for abstinence and C for contraception. In this class, Texas gets an incomplete.

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