

John A. Carranza // On October 29, 2019, the Austin Independent School District's Board of Trustees approved a new sex education curriculum that will teach students about gender identity and same-sex relationships, consent and interpersonal relationships, as well as abstinence-plus (abstinence is the best way to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, but still conveys information about contraception). Predictably, conservative community members rallied in opposition to the change in standards charging that the new curriculum amounted to indoctrination and teaching young children sex acts.

In 2020, the Texas State Board of Education "is expected next year to revise its policies on how school districts...should teach health and sex to students," (Swaby, 2019). The potential to overhaul the curriculum could have significant health impacts for students in a state where, in 2017, 62.6% of students in the twelfth grade is higher than the national average of 57.3%. The state also had the seventh highest teen birth rate in 2017. Additionally, safety concerns for LGBTQ+ teens is at a high with 59.5% of the population feeling unsafe because of their sexual orientation, and 44.6% because of their gender expression. (Statistics can be found in the Texas Freedom Network and SIECUS report, *Time for Change*.)

Historically, the fight over sex education in public schools is nothing new, and is often a reflection of cultural mores in the various times and places that these disputes arise. For example, at the turn of the twentieth century, sex education campaigns were created to stem the spread of venereal diseases and instill a sense of morality. Situating sex education in public schools only ensured that the reproduction of good, moral citizens would emerge (Brandt 23-31). Freeman found that sex education for girls before the 1960s focused less on sexual activity, and more on human biology and family relationships (Freeman xi, 10,20).

In the postwar period, the anthropologist Margaret Mead rose to national prominence on the success of her highly influential *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), which was still read along with her other studies of primitive societies. Mead's fame was based in part on these societies, but she was also known for her clearly written books and concise commentary on world events. She also made the effort to understand America's adolescents and young adults like most older adults had not. She incisively observed: "Young people never are what they were in somebody else's day," ("Incidentally..."). Citing concerns over sex roles, the atomic bomb, harm done to the environment, increasing use of technology, and other developments in society, Mead believed that the generation gap between pre-World War II adults and postwar young people had created a division where the older generation no longer had all the answers to the latter's questions (Dempsey 130-

131). In these observations, she believed that adolescents and young adults were capable of exercising agency and making decisions, but were at the mercy of older adult censorship (“Margaret Mead: 1901-1978” 57).

For Mead, sexuality and its expression was about the dominance of cultural norms than it was about the biological urges felt by people. Cultural barriers were often times found within such institutions as the government that acted as a mechanism of surveillance, but also society in general with their puritanical views of sex. Comparatively thinking about sex education in Sweden, Mead saw a number of similarities between the two countries. However, one major difference was that the United States was not homogenous because so many Americans came from different ethnic backgrounds. As a result, when crafting education programs, it was important to remember that many worldviews were meeting for one central goal. Effective teaching was consistent in its goals and applied to everyone (Mead 35-36).

Sex education is entirely contingent on the time in which it is being taught or debated. Its uses rely on attempting to understand who we are based on a multiplicity of identities, whether they are Texan or American, but should keep in mind that sexuality—much like society—is constantly changing based on new cultural norms. It is incumbent on decisionmakers to cultivate a sense of empathy and to understand that a person may express their gender in one way or love someone of the same sex, but are still entitled to a safe and healthy life. These changes in gender and sexuality are not aberrant, but the forward progression of people who already existed often in the shadows of American society. Comprehensive sex education that also includes newer expressions of gender and sexuality will reduce the number of sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies, teach consent, and improve interpersonal relationships.

Works Cited

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