

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Politics, Public Policy, and Sex Education

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Educators have long overheard students give each other advice about sex. It's part of the background chatter that happens before class starts, in the hallway between classes, or during lunch in the cafeteria. "Don't worry," one student was overheard saying in Charlotte, North Carolina. "You can't get pregnant if you're wearing that friendship bracelet."¹ Students at this particular school faced a wide variety of economic challenges—more than 90 percent were eligible for free and reduced-price meals; still others migrated to the Charlotte area as children without parents, making a seemingly impossible trek by themselves across the US southern border. These students showed incredible resilience and promise. But they also came to school with basic gaps in their understanding about the world around them.

When overhearing students talk about sex, teachers have often felt hamstrung. They don't always know if they can correct misunderstandings because of the politically charged nature of sex education. In the case of North Carolina, state officials in 2009 passed a comprehensive sex education law known as the Healthy Youth Act. The act required schools to support "abstinence until marriage" and offer information on "the effectiveness and risks of all FDA-approved forms of contraceptives."² The law restricted sex education to three school grades. But it did offer flexibility to school districts with regard to how to interpret standards, and did not promote a particular curriculum.³

In 2023, however, North Carolina passed a Parents' Bill of Rights—a new law that, among other things, restricted sex education to only those children whose parents opted them in. More than 75 percent of parents in Charlotte failed to do so.⁴

¹School observation by A. J. Angulo, March 2013.

²Sarah Preston, "Healthy Youth Act: A Bittersweet Victory for North Carolina's Teens," *ACLU News & Commentary*, July 15, 2009, <https://www.aclu.org/news/reproductive-freedom/healthy-youth-act-bittersweet-victory-north>.

³Sydney Hoover, "What Is Taught in NC Sex Ed? State Law Promotes Abstinence, Heterosexual Relationships," *Wilmington Star News*, June 27, 2022, <https://www.starnewsonline.com/story/news/2022/06/27/nc-sex-education-promotes-abstinence-heterosexual-relationships/7625425001>.

⁴Alexandria Sands, "Majority of CMS Students on Track to Miss Sex Ed under New Opt-In Law," *Axios Charlotte*, Sept. 25, 2023, <https://charlotte.axios.com/340167/parents-bill-of-rights-cms-sex-education-ed-opt-in-out/>.

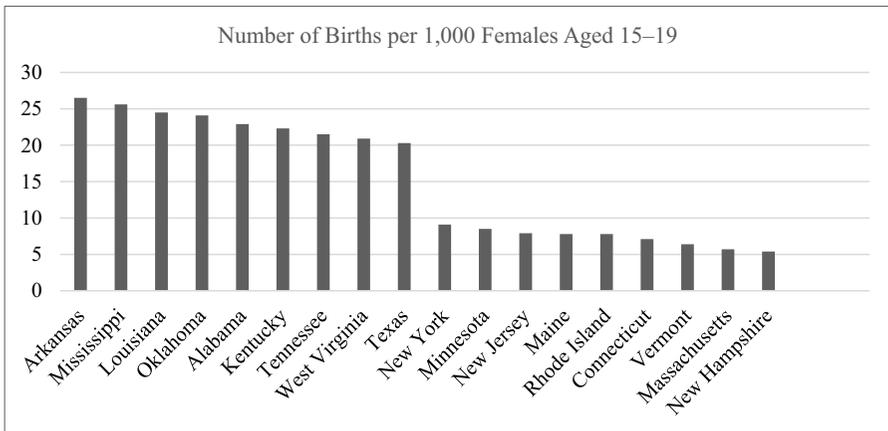


Figure 1. Number of births per 1,000 females aged 15–19 by US State.

Source: National Center for Health Statistics, “Teen Birth Rate by State,” 2021, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/teen-births/teenbirths.htm>.

In the US, governors and state legislators historically have recognized sex education as a contentious matter that, at least politically, would be best managed at the local level. As such, the politics of sex education has had real consequences. Consider the long-standing differences between northern and southern states in terms of teen pregnancy, as shown in Figure 1. The top nine states as ranked by teen pregnancies—Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Alabama, Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Texas—are southern states with stronger ties to evangelical Christianity. They share a vision of sex education as a family matter, rather than a state one. When public schools get involved in sex education, that involvement is frequently viewed as a state-sponsored intrusion into family lives.⁵

Northeastern and mid-Atlantic states, by contrast, have historically had higher levels of support for sex education, and consistently rank among the lowest in rates of teenage pregnancy. States with the fewest teen pregnancies include New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maine, New Jersey, and New York.

Globally, the political and public policy picture appears largely the same. Few topics are as controversial as sex education. Many of the world’s schools simply don’t include it in the curriculum for fear of inciting opposition from families, religious groups, or political authorities. To crib Jonathan Zimmerman’s phrase, sex education is “too hot to handle.”⁶ Yet it’s hard to imagine an issue more central to personal or public welfare.

Sexually transmitted infections annually cause more than a million deaths worldwide, as well as hundreds of millions of illnesses. In the US, roughly 1 percent of deaths

⁵See also “Teen Pregnancy Rates by State 2023,” *World Population Review*, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/teen-pregnancy-rates-by-state>.

⁶Jonathan Zimmerman, *Too Hot to Handle: A Global History of Sex Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

are related to sexual behavior. And according to one estimate, the lifetime medical costs of sexually transmitted infections in the US is \$16 billion.⁷

Beyond keeping people safe and reducing the negative economic impacts of illness, nations have a strong interest in sex education as a mechanism of population control. Unlike the protection of individual and public health, sex education for the purpose of managing reproduction is hardly an unfettered good. In addition to the risk of infringing on personal liberties, population control efforts have frequently been rooted in biological racism. Nevertheless, this interest often outweighs any unease about broaching the subject of sex in the classroom.

It's also the case that sex education can advance a far more straightforward aim: personal pleasure. Unlike state interests in safety, economy, and population management, sensuality has not historically claimed pride of place in the school curriculum. Still, it's difficult to discuss the topic of sex education without acknowledging the topic of most immediate concern to many of the young people in such classes.

The articles in this special issue of *HEQ* address all of these themes. These manuscripts arrived in our editorial office by chance, rather than in response to a call for submissions. We recognized a common theme and worked to group the articles together in a way that might create greater resonance, as we have done with previous issues. Yet, in this case, we couldn't have asked for a better survey of the uses and importance of sex education around the world. Collectively, these articles cover a tremendous amount of ground—both literally, in terms of spatial geography, and figuratively.

Consider the case of Sweden. Sara Backman Prytz's "The Textbook Masturbator: A Renegotiated Discourse in Official Swedish Sex-Education Guidelines and Textbooks, circa 1945–2000" examines the evolution of one nation's views on teaching children about masturbation. Over the course of a half-century, Sweden fundamentally changed its school guidelines and textbooks on the topic. Descriptions of self-pleasure shifted from a harmful act to a harmless, natural activity. Along the way, Prytz argues that "state-controlled curricula" transformed Swedish norms about gender and sexuality.

In the US, sex education intersected with racial ideologies in places like Los Angeles. Julia B. Haager's "Eugenics, Family-Life Sex Education, and Juvenile Delinquency in Los Angeles County, California," illustrates the ways in which eugenic ideas about racial "fitness" shaped curricula during the Second World War. Her study shows that social fears drove divided factions to agree on teaching young girls about their "civic responsibility" when choosing a partner and in making genetics and heredity a pillar of sex education.

Policymakers in Singapore, meanwhile, considered sex education as critical to population control efforts. Benjamin Goh's "A Glocal History of Post-Independence Singapore's First Sex Education Curriculum, 1966–1973" examines how sex talk in schools played out in a region experiencing a population boom in the 1960s and 1970s. Using Singapore as a case study, Goh finds that concerns over birth rates—locally and globally—gave rise to the country's first sex education curriculum.

⁷National Center for HIV, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention, "Incidence, Prevalence, and Cost of Sexually Transmitted Infections in the United States," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/newsroom/fact-sheets/std/STI-Incidence-Prevalence-Cost-Factsheet.html>.

But what happens when sex education ideas migrate from one part of the world to another? Daniel Töpfer offers one example in “Socialist Sex Education and Its Transnational Entanglements: Monika Krause and the Effort to ‘Teach Tenderness’ to the People.” This study follows the Cold War-era travels of an intrepid sex educator from East Germany to Cuba, and her eventual rise to fame as the “Cuban Queen of Condoms.” Through Krause’s educational efforts, we are allowed to pull back the iron curtain a bit to see how socialist countries compared with the rest of the world when it came to ideas about sex, love, marriage, partnership, and family.

The special issue concludes with a Policy Dialogue between Adam Laats and Kasey Meehan—a wide-ranging discussion that addresses sex education, as well as the related issue of book banning. Regular readers of *HEQ* will be familiar with Adam Laats’s work on conservatism in public education, and we were fortunate to pair him with Kasey Meehan, who is presently the Freedom to Read program director at PEN America. Their conversation is timely for readers in the US, where book-banning efforts have sprung up across the nation. But *HEQ* readers around the world will especially appreciate how the dialogue intersects with historical and contemporary pressures felt across borders. Globally, educators at all levels face the universal challenge of balancing diverse perspectives from families, state officials, religious groups, and many others. How sex education has been taught—from Charlotte to Havana—can tell us much about our social, political, and public policy priorities. These histories offer insight into our views of human nature—not only in terms of sex and sexuality but also in how we communicate some of life’s most important experiences.