

Abstinence-Only vs. Comprehensive Sex Education

Teens and Sex, 2008

Sharon Lerner, "The Sex-Ed Divide," *The American Prospect*, vol. 12, September 24, 2001. Copyright © 2001 The American Prospect, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission from The American Prospect, 11 Beacon Street, Suite 1120, Boston, MA 02108.

Sharon Lerner is a journalist and a senior fellow at the Center for New York City Affairs at the New School. Between 1998 and 2008 she wrote on a wide variety of issues, especially focusing on women's issues, reproductive politics, and the impact these have on teens. In the following article, she explores the divide created when one Midwestern town—faced with a highly emotional debate over what should be included in their public school health curriculum—divided the health program into two classes, one teaching traditional "comprehensive" sex education (including information on anatomy, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, safer sex, and contraception), and the other teaching that "sex outside of wedlock is physically, emotionally, and spiritually dangerous." Lerner asserts that dividing the curriculum inevitably also divided the community—students and adults alike—and left many concerned that more public funding was being poured into teaching children less useful or inaccurate information.

If Maple Grove Senior High chose a prom queen, Ashley Gort would have had a good shot at the crown. Ashley, a petite and popular junior with delicate features, wore deep-sea blue to the event, accessorizing her fully beaded gown with a blue necklace like the one Kate Winslet wore in *Titanic* and matching blue rhinestones scattered over her pale blond hair. Her boyfriend, Mike Conlin, borrowed his uncle's Lexus to ferry Ashley to dinner at Landmark Center in St. Paul, Minnesota. Driving away from the restaurant on an unseasonably warm night a few months ago, the couple looked as if they might be headed off for a romantic evening. But while many of their classmates spent the wee hours in rented hot tubs or boogying in Minneapolis clubs, Ashley and Mike drove the half-hour north to a friend's finished basement in their suburban hometown. With their parents stationed upstairs and peeking in at regular intervals, Ashley, Mike, and a few other couples watched movies, played Ping-Pong, and talked until dawn. They did not drink, smoke, or, as Ashley puts it, "touch each other inappropriately."

"We couldn't get like all close with each other," Ashley explains. Per an agreement they struck with their parents, the kids were allowed to cuddle and hold hands, but physical contact ended there. "Couples weren't allowed in rooms by themselves," says Ashley. "There was nothing else you could do, really."

If such rules sound strange, they don't to Ashley and many of the other kids enrolled in the Osseo School District's abstinence-until-marriage class, which teaches students that sex outside of wedlock is physically, emotionally, and spiritually dangerous, while carefully omitting information about birth control, homosexuality, abortion, and other topics that might muddy the message. The curriculum includes sections on "good touch versus bad touch" and refusal skills, and the *Sexuality, Commitment and Family* textbook features a diagram meant to help students figure out exactly where to draw the line (arrows endorse handholding and talking, but a red danger sign appears at necking).

A Sex-Ed Compromise

While almost a quarter of the nation's school districts now [as of 2001] teach abstinence this way, Osseo schools have earned a page in sex-ed history for offering both of the conflicting approaches to teen sex that have riven the country. Students here can take either the new abstinence class or the traditional course, which both warns

kids against sex and prepares them for it with information about condoms and such. For Ashley, the choice was simple: "They talk about gays and lesbians and stuff like that, and I personally don't want to hear about that," she says of the older option. "I want to marry the opposite sex. I want to spend my life with that one person and share things with that one person and not other people."

For Josh Goldberg, a baseball player and good student who is in Ashley's grade at Maple Grove, the sex-ed decision was also a no-brainer. Josh went for the more explicit of the two health courses. Though some students have taken to calling this the "slutty" class, Josh would hardly fit anyone's definition of the term. As a sophomore, he counted himself among his school's "normal people group," which he translated to mean that he and his friends didn't drink or go to parties and "there's a lot of people who are a lot more weird than us." Indeed, when I met Josh on the first of several visits to Maple Grove, he and his friends seemed to be spending most of their free time jumping up and down on a trampoline in the Goldbergs' yard and playing with walkie-talkies. ("Come in, Josh. Come in, Josh. You're going to fail your driving test." Hysterical laughter.) Still, when it was time to sign up for health—a requirement for graduation—Josh and most of his friends opted for what he calls the "regular class," while most of Ashley's friends joined her in taking the abstinence-until-marriage course.

And so it is with students in Osseo's three senior-high and four junior-high schools: Kids who share Bunsen burners and school colors and class presidents split into two camps to hear two seemingly irreconcilable perspectives on sex. This sorting clearly has something to do with the students' own feelings about sex. (Of her few friends who didn't take abstinence class, Ashley worries, "Gosh, I would have thought they would've liked to be in this class.") But the division has even more to do with their parents. Between the two classes and the two adult factions still fighting bitterly over what should go on in the classes, it can sometimes seem as if the national fault line over sex education runs right through Osseo, Minnesota.

Parents Battle Over Curriculum

It was a snowy morning six years ago when Ashley's mother, Jeri Gort, felt the first rumblings of Osseo's war over sex ed. The day started out like any other in the Gort house; Jeri kissed her husband, Randy, good-bye as he headed off to work, wrangled Ashley and her younger sister through breakfast, and then bundled up her daughters and headed out toward the bus stop. When she got there, another mother mentioned that Ashley's fifth-grade teacher would define sexual intercourse in class that year—and everything shifted for Gort. "At that moment, I truly believe the Holy Spirit came down and made me teary and gave me the grieving of the heart," she marveled recently [as of 2001]. Standing on the corner, watching her daughters and their friends run around in the snow, the innocence of all of Osseo's children suddenly weighed on her. "I knew then that things needed to change."

That Jeri Gort would be the one to change things in Osseo was also, as she sees it, a matter of divine intervention. "Most Christian women are soft, but I'm not soft and I'm not sweet. I'm an oddity," she said recently, as if she were explaining the fact of her blue eyes or her Minnesota-blond hair. "God made me a little rough around the edges. That's why He spoke to me that day."

As she stands just five feet tall in white canvas sneakers, with a gentle, Midwestern voice, Gort's rough edges aren't immediately apparent. Still, she is the one most people around here credit—or blame, depending on their point of view—for first stoking tensions over the Osseo schools' approach to sex and then pushing through the district's Solomonic attempt to resolve them. Starting from that simple bus-stop revelation, Gort managed to create an abstinence class in a school district where most parents didn't see the need for one and thus set up a road map for conservatives around the country who wanted to do the same.

After hearing about the imminent lesson, Gort decided to "opt" Ashley out of, taking her to lunch on definition day rather than having her exposed to the information. Shortly after, she took herself down to the Osseo District office to review all the sex-education materials and began speaking at parents' meetings about what she saw there. Not only did sex come up earlier than she would have liked, she reported to parents throughout the district, but the subject was introduced before marriage was. Perhaps most troubling to Gort were the descriptions of different methods of contraception, which she took as an invitation for kids to have sex. "Only half of high-school kids have sex," she told one group, citing the figure that has become the half-empty glass of sex-education debates. "What about the kids who don't have sex? What about supporting them?"

Josh Goldberg's mother, Tobe, one of the parents assembled at that meeting in the Maple Grove Elementary School library, was more concerned with preventing disease and pregnancy in the half of kids who inevitably will have sex. "You can't have too much information," the mother of two is fond of saying. "That woman wants to get rid of sex ed," is what she actually whispered to her husband Arlin that night as they sat squeezed into the child-size chairs in the library. The Goldbergs had already had "the talk" with Josh and his then-10-year-old brother, Noah, making sure that they knew the basics of reproduction and why it's so important to put it off until later. But Goldberg also wanted her boys to hear about both sex and birth control at school. So when Gort said she was starting a group to reconsider the sex-ed program, Goldberg joined.

Officially, Osseo's Human Sexuality Curriculum Advisory Committee was just supposed to make recommendations to the school board about how to update sex-education material. In practice, though, monthly meetings were both more intimate and more explosive than that, with Gort leading the committee majority and Goldberg serving as the spokesperson for the much smaller faction that wanted to keep sex ed as it was. The two sides were able to agree on a few things—that pictures of animals with their babies were appropriate for the younger children, for instance, and that fifth-graders were ready to learn about the physical changes that happen in puberty. But on most other issues, people who might have otherwise been exchanging niceties in the supermarket ended up attacking one another's views on the most personal of questions: Did the clitoris deserve mention in a discussion of female anatomy? Did children need to learn about masturbation? Homosexuality?

Gort suggested that the subject of abortion, which was introduced in eighth grade along with sexual orientation and masturbation, offended some parents and should be removed. In response, another mother muttered something about returning to back-alley days, slammed her eighth-grade textbook shut, and—as others in the dwindling Goldberg camp had already done—stomped out of the sexuality-committee room for good. Committee members also spent months arguing over birth control and the nature of pornography.

A Cultural and Religious Divide

As the debate became more specific (several meetings were devoted entirely to the failure rates of condoms), their positions reflected a more fundamental divide. You could see it as political—Goldberg, who eventually became the only person in her camp, was also the only self-described liberal among about two dozen committee regulars. Or you could see the district's struggle as part of its booming development. The 66-square-mile patch that makes up the Osseo School District used to be potato country, but in the past 20 years, while the number of students in the district has doubled, the area has morphed into the kind of tidy suburb that so many Americans now call home. And as curlicues of manicured streets have unfurled and Babies "R" Us, Barnes and Noble, and Starbucks have sprung into service, some have mourned for Osseo's rural past. Sexuality-committee chairman Dean Potts seemed nostalgic both for Osseo's roots and for his own boyhood on a North Dakota farm, where he learned both his conservative values and a certain frankness about sex. ("At grade level four or five, I was personally out pulling lambs out of ewes," Potts recalled fondly.)

The religious split was even plainer. One of a handful of Jews in Maple Grove and the only Jew on the committee, Tobe Goldberg reached an icy standoff with Potts, who was studying to be a minister in the Church of the Nazarene throughout his tenure as chairman. Another committee member, Tony Hoffman, quoted Scripture when he argued against an educational video that he felt wrongly portrayed gay men with AIDS as victims. And while Goldberg stopped even exchanging pleasantries with her fellow members, a core group of mothers Gort calls the "prayer warriors" was gathering regularly at her house to pray. The prayer warriors prayed for the success of the abstinence class in their cars, while walking, or sometimes even in the hallways and parking lots outside important sexuality-committee meetings.

The prayer warriors were also there when the school board formalized these ideological differences three years ago [1998]. Jeri Gort talks of the plan that the board approved by a 3-2 vote as a compromise. But Tobe Goldberg didn't experience it that way. Not only did the school board create the new two-track health program over her objections; it also approved the committee's proposal to change the definition of sex that all students would hear. After that board meeting, which stretched until 3 A.M., sexual intercourse was officially no longer an act between any two people but one that occurs between married parents of opposite sex "when the father's erect penis is inserted into the mother's vagina."

In the Abstinence Classroom

On the wall of sex-ed instructor Chris Meisch's classroom there is a saying spelled out in orange and black construction paper: "No knowledge is more crucial than that of health." Tacked up nearby are posters addressing why it's important not to drink and drive and why tobacco is so dangerous. On the first day of the family-life section of Meisch's third-period abstinence-until-marriage class, there is also a question on the board: "What is love?" Students filtering in after the 9:37 bell obligingly search for an answer. "The feeling you have for people in your family?" one boy asks hopefully. "When you care about someone a lot, even more than you can say?" offers another. When no one comes up with the definition he's looking for, Meisch, a young, athletic-looking teacher, prompts the 10th and 11th graders, asking them to name different kinds of love. By the time they work their way to "boyfriend-girlfriend love"—past love for parents, pets, and chocolate milk—the point is getting clearer: Love doesn't always involve sex. "You fall into infatuation," says Meisch, his tone making it clear that this is not the desired outcome. "You grow into love." A few students jot this down in their notebooks.

The two versions of high-school health impart many of the same lessons: Drugs are bad for you, exercise good, leafy greens essential. But the abstinence-until-marriage version grapples with the more amorphous questions of values in a way that its counterpart does not. The new course takes the long view, explaining that marriage between a man and a woman has been the norm throughout history and that the only safe sex is "with a marriage partner who is having sex only with you." Students hear about what makes a compatible mate and even why they should want to mate in the first place. (Parenting, as one abstinence textbook explains, is "a tremendously rewarding commitment based on responsibility and self-sacrifice.") When the subject of birth control comes up, teachers are supposed to discuss only its failures and emphasize its inadequacy.

Students in abstinence class not only hear this particular take on love and romance, they must also present it. Though Ashley did her oral report on tobacco, others whose presentations involved more controversial topics had to cast them carefully in the negative. So when it came time for her report on teens and sexually transmitted diseases, Carol Christensen steered clear of the "good stuff" about birth control that she says she would have mentioned in the other class, trying instead to make a loopy argument that birth control is bad because of its inconvenience. "Like who's going to go and take out a measuring spoon and measure out the exact spermicide at 1:30 in the morning on a Tuesday night?" she says.

In the interest of preventing such situations, abstinence class offers dating exercises. One homework assignment has students write out their dating standards (extra credit if parents sign them). Another asks, "What do you consider the values of postponing sexual gratification?" Several sections advise on setting limits, though by 10th grade Ashley Gort has figured out many of her own.

The Curriculum Divides the Community

"If I know that a person has had a history, or whatever, then I don't get involved," she explained to me one afternoon as we sat in "Maple Grove Free," a family-oriented evangelical church located near the Dairy Queen here. Though she was then "on hold" with the captain of the basketball team, Ashley had never gone long without a date. The key to such lighthearted socializing was to communicate: "You have to make sure you pick the kind of person who feels the way you do; then it's easier to bring up the subject and everything."

Her mother's guidelines also may have helped. Boys were allowed to come by the house and even hang out with Ashley in the family room. (One time, when she was grounded, three stopped by to pay tribute in a single evening.) But per house rules, the family-room door always remained open. And while Jeri trusted Ashley and the Holy Ghost, whom she credited with giving Ashley the desire to stay pure, she was cheered that her daughter's romances never seemed to last more than a few weeks.

Meanwhile, Josh Goldberg spent his 10th grade more engaged with school and sports than with girls. Still, he felt he had made the right choice about sex ed; abstinence class seemed to leave some teens unprepared. Other students had similar objections to the new class. The *Harbinger*, the Maple Grove High student paper, weighed in with several articles and a searing, unanimous staff editorial condemning the district, the human-sexuality committee, and the school board for "offering a curriculum of questionable value that is as deceptive as it is bigoted." The writers took particular offense over the abstinence textbook, which warned against marrying someone of a different economic, cultural, or religious background. When one mother who supports abstinence confronted the *Harbinger's* faculty adviser in the school parking lot, tempers flared. She angrily complained that the editorial quoted the abstinence materials out of context, and the adviser, as she tells it, shot back that she was "desperately sad as a fellow Christian that you people have decided to make one of God's greatest gifts such a shameful and divisive thing."

The battle that had already torn up the sexuality committee was spreading. Sam Garst, the father of a senior in the district and the retired CEO of a deer-repellant company, founded Osseo Parents for Straight Talk About Sex and printed a brochure with the headline "How Do You Feel About Spending \$96,000 More to Educate Our Kids Less?" (The total cost of new abstinence-education materials and arrangements for splitting up students actually ended up closer to \$130,000.) Though he got a few positive responses, Garst also received several phone calls informing him that he was going to hell, dozens of angry e-mails (including one accompanied by a computer virus that wiped out his hard drive), and piles of hate letters. "Hey Sammy," read a typical one. "You go ahead and hand out condoms and pills to your kids, we'll teach ours right and wrong."

Meanwhile, across the ideological divide—and a couple of streets—Garst's neighbor, Scott Brokaw, also felt that he was being attacked for his beliefs. One of two Osseo school board members who championed the new abstinence class, Brokaw says he was wrongly accused of beating his wife by someone who was angry over his position on the sex-ed curriculum. A radio-advertising salesman who calls his opponents "vile and mean-spirited

people," Brokaw ended up hiring a lawyer to defend himself against the charge. On another occasion, when Brokaw and his wife were eating in a local restaurant, a table of teachers and parents opposed to the class sent him a drink that, the waitress informed him, was known as a Blow Job.

How Students Choose Sides

For Osseo students, the cost of choosing a side can loom even larger. When he was a junior at Maple Grove High, Andy Caruso went so far as to obtain a waiver of the district's health-class requirement because he feared the assumptions kids might make about his sex life whichever track he chose. "It seems like a personal thing that you don't want all your teachers and your friends to know," he said.

The matter of public perception is, not surprisingly, particularly sticky for girls, who make up the majority of students in Osseo's abstinence-until-marriage classes. Even in a district with female student-body presidents and girls' basketball teams that make it to the state finals, girls are still bound by the "hush-hush" rule, as Jessie Sodren, who took the abstinence-until-marriage class, calls it. According to her then-boyfriend, who took the other class, the opposite is true for boys. "Guys just say, like, 'cool,'" he explains. "They just give each other high fives and stuff."

Another couple who split up for health class is less candid. "I've always known I would save sex for marriage. It's just the way I was brought up," says the girl, a 16-year-old sophomore, whose plans for future include "doing something with money, making it grow and making more money." There would have been no reason to doubt her story had her best friend not mentioned the day before that this same girl had just gone through a terrifying two-and-a-half-month pregnancy scare.

By all student accounts, many sexually active kids end up in the abstinence class—a situation that some attribute to parents who sign them up for it without knowing what's really going on. "I know the kids that were in there and, like, I know some of them shouldn't be in there," explains Josh Goldberg, raising his eyebrows meaningfully. "I don't think their parents have any idea what's going on in their life." Ashley Gort, too, recognizes this. "Some of them, if they do do it, they're probably not even going to marry the guy," she told me, shaking her head.

Indeed, students end up in one class as opposed to the other for all sorts of reasons. Carol Christensen took abstinence because the traditional class conflicted with Spanish. Another student, who identifies herself as a born-again Christian and whose mother got pregnant at 16, signed up for abstinence but landed in the traditional class as the result of an administrative error. And one sophomore says she took abstinence because she heard it was easier than the alternative. When I asked her what she hoped to get out of it, she replied, "a C."

But even kids with the clearest of intentions can't know what's in store for them. For Ashley, the surprise came in the form of Mike, the handsome senior with three jobs who, for the past 10 months, has replaced all her other admirers. With a cell phone and her grandfather's hulking old Cadillac now at her disposal, Ashley can see Mike whenever she's not doing homework, working at Old Navy, or at dance-line practice.

The Gorts do have a few hard-and-fast rules though: If Ashley doesn't check in, she loses the car; her weekend curfew is midnight, no exceptions; and when she comes in, she has to kiss her mother goodnight.

"I have a good nose—I can smell pot from a mile away," says Jeri Gort, who is not above sniffing during this

tenderest of evening rituals. "I tell her and her friends, if you start drinking, there's no way you can be a virgin when you graduate." Even with all the work she's done to make sure that her daughter gets the right messages, it still comes down to guarding and worrying for Gort.

The Goldbergs, too, are nervously watching a new relationship blossom. Josh's girlfriend Janessa first started jumping on the trampoline along with Josh and his friends at the end of sophomore year. Next came cuddling on the couch, long phone calls that Josh sometimes conducted under a blanket if his parents were around, and his crash course in rose buying.

Even though they have already had "the talk," the Goldbergs find themselves venturing back into that uncomfortable territory lately, reminding Josh about the girl across the street who got pregnant at 16. They're hoping that their message, along with the instruction he's gotten in school, will protect their son from all that could go wrong on his way to adulthood.

It's not terribly different from what's going on just five minutes away at the Gorts' house.

Further Readings

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