



It's Perfectly Traditional: Christian Right Joined by Common Core Opposition

A Summary Report on Sexuality Education Controversies,
2013-2014



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Cover photo: Opponents of the Common Core State Standards in English and Math were visible at numerous public rallies around the nation in 2013-14. Not all opponents were politically conservative: the nonprofit education news-gathering organization Chalkbeat New York captured this scene at Gotham’s City Hall. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/chalkbeatny/14037889259>

Introduction: Common Core as Hard Core – Old Whine in New Bottles

Last year SIECUS [highlighted the significance of the digital generation](#) in sexuality education controversies involving new technologies, from alarm over “sexting” to the savvy use of Twitter to protest abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. Yet, in the recently completed 2013-14 school year, it appeared that some traditions never change.

The use of social media and online petitions is here to stay, and the digital age continues to provide opportunities for controversy, as in Florida, where school administrators expelled a student for appearing in sexually explicit online videos. But the bulk of this more recent school year’s controversies involved good old-fashioned book-banning and censorship, instigated by a mix of concerned parents and those Religious Right advocacy organizations that have opposed inclusive, medically-accurate sexuality education for decades. The familiar cast of characters includes the American Family Association (AFA), Family Research Council (FRC), and National Abstinence Education Association (NAEA), all of whom are profiled in the SIECUS [Community Action Kit](#), a resource to help local advocates working to build support for sexuality education. .

Books, billboards, comics, poetry, plays, and posters all proved capable of raising the ire of conservative activists—including the frequently challenged sexuality education book *It’s Perfectly Normal* (for a 21st century twist, in e-book form) and Toni Morrison’s 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*. Opponents alleged various grounds for objection including sexual violence and incest, homosexuality, masturbation, nudity, and bestiality.

A unique spin this year, however, is the alliance to oppose sexuality education forged between the Religious Right and the emerging anti-Common Core movement. While the [Common Core State Standards](#) (Common Core), a set of K-12 academic success measures developed under the guidance of the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association, cover only English and math, their adoption represents a milestone in the longstanding (and controversial) drive toward the standardization of curriculum in U.S. public schools.¹ By the 2012-2013 school year, 45 states had already adopted the standards—yet by March 2014, more than 180 bills related to Common Core and other educational standards had been introduced in at least 39 states, primarily seeking to limit or withdraw from the national standards. A [report by the Southern Poverty Law Center](#) (SPLC) explains that “to Christian Right, Tea Party and antigovernment activists, the state-driven effort to lift student achievement is actually ‘Obamacore,’ a nefarious, left-wing plot to wrest control of education from local school systems and parents.”²

Investigating the Religious Right, SPLC noted particular opposition to Common Core from Concerned Women for American (CWA), founded by evangelical Christian Beverly LaHaye, and the Eagle Forum, founded by antifeminist Catholic Phyllis Schlafly, infamous for defeating the Equal Rights Amendment in the early 1980s. LaHaye has written extensively about the

¹ Common Core State Standards Initiative web page, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.corestandards.org/>.

² Southern Poverty Law Center, *Public Schools in the Crosshairs: Far-Right Propaganda and the Common Core State Standards*, May 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/publications/Public-Schools-in-the-Crosshairs-Far-Right-Propaganda-and-the-Common-Core-State-Standards>.

proper role for women and coauthored a book on sexual satisfaction for Christian married couples with husband Tim, who also wrote the wildly popular apocalyptic *Left Behind* series. CWA views Common Core standards as a threat to homeschooling, which many religious conservatives see as a refuge from the “secular humanist” public school system, and which increases their ability to instruct youth using their own [religious curricula and textbooks](#).³

Amid the legislative proposals on the state level and anti-Common Core rhetoric on the community level is an emerging trend that conflates the Common Core with the [National Sexuality Education Standards: Core Content and Skills, K-12](#) (NSES) and the alleged corruption of ‘innocent children.’ The NSES were published in 2012 by the Future of Sex Education (FoSE) initiative, a collaborative effort of SIECUS, Advocates for Youth, Answer, and other organizations including the American School Health Association. The NSES are unaffiliated with Common Core but opponents of both worked hard during the 2012-13 to obscure this fact.

Legislation introduced in **Alabama**, **Delaware**, and **Maryland** in 2014 would impose prohibitions or restrictions on the use of the NSES, among other non-Common Core standards (such as Next Generation Science Standards, the National Curriculum for Social Studies, and the National Health Education Standards).⁴ Other proposed state legislation opposing Common Core-related standards, such as in **Kentucky**, could be interpreted as a threat to NSES given the conflation of the standards.

SIECUS believes the inclusion of sexuality education in these bills and in local skirmishes is a deliberate move by abstinence-only-until-marriage proponents and Common Core opponents to 1) form an alliance drawing additional support to the anti-Common Core efforts and 2) provide an under-the-radar means of blocking sexuality education. Opponents of Common Core have proved able to draw in cultural conservatives by denunciations—and fear-mongering—over exposing children to “pornography.” Several established Religious Right organizations, such as AFA and FRC, who have declined to take an official position against Common Core, nonetheless lent support to its opponents in controversies over the portrayal of sexuality in some reading materials recommended as part of Common Core.

This report summarizes recent proposed legislation, key local battles, and players who worked to oppose school-based sexuality education. For the 2013-14 school year, SIECUS has given special attention to the influence of Religious Right national organizations and state affiliates, and that of the Common Core opposition. Understanding this connection can help to prepare sexuality education advocates to identify the potential national forces behind a seemingly ‘local’ problem. SIECUS’ [Community Action Kit](#) provides additional profiles on comprehensive sexuality education opponents, tips on counter-organizing, and more resources.

Sexualizing Common Core: Tactics Stranger than Fiction

The inclusion of Toni Morrison’s 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye* on Common Core’s recommended reading list for 11th graders set the stage for multiple controversies in states including **Alabama**,

³ Bruce Wilson, “Examples from A Beka Book and Bob Jones University Press Curricula,” accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://vimeo.com/43687872>.

⁴ OpenStates.org. Legislation accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://openstates.org/al/bills/2014rs/SB443/>, <http://openstates.org/de/bills/147/SB269/>, and <http://openstates.org/md/bills/2014/HB764/>.

Colorado, and Ohio. The novel tells the story of an African American girl named Pecola, who grows up during the 1930s and 1940s in Lorain, Ohio, and, made to feel ugly by the black adults and other children around her, longs to have the eye and skin color of her white peers. Conservative opponents object to the depictions of incest and sexual assault; Pecola becomes pregnant by her father, though the baby is born prematurely and dies.

The novel's observations about race are at least as potent as its observations about sexuality. Shortly after its publication 44 years ago, *New York Times* book reviewer John Leonard wrote:

“Miss Morrison exposes the negative of the Dick-and-Jane-and-Mother-and-Father-and-Dog-and-Cat photograph that appears in our reading primers, and she does it with a prose so precise, so faithful to speech and so charged with pain and wonder that the novel becomes poetry.”⁵

While the book is no stranger to controversy, ranking 15th on the American Library Association's [most frequently challenged books list](#) from 2000-2009, the added bump of being called “Common Core-approved pornography” brought it to the number two spot for 2013.⁶

Brain science, an evolving field that has been caught in the crosshairs of controversy related to sexuality education and adolescent development, has been invoked by some opponents who link the sexual content of *The Bluest Eye* to the perceived menace of national educational standards for literacy. Macey France, an Oregon-based Common Core opponent and contributor to the conservative blog Politichicks, insisted that, “Children's developing brains do not need to be assaulted with this notion of sexual violence... Children are simply not mature enough to process the violent, incestuous sex scenes in the book.”⁷ France relied on research by Dr. Jill Manning, a mother with children in the Broomfield, Colorado school district where the novel was challenged during summer 2013, who claims that “there is a compelling argument on how this has negative effects on adolescents.”⁸

Manning is a former fellow at the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing think tank that produces studies promoting the efficacy of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs—and whose

⁵ John Leonard, “Books of the Times: The Bluest Eye,” *New York Times Book Review*, November 13, 1970, accessed September 12, 2013 at <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/01/11/home/morrison-bluest.html>.

⁶ Trisha Marczak, “Toni Morrison, Child Pornographer?,” *Mintpressnews.com*, September 7, 2013, accessed September 12, 2013 at <http://www.mintpressnews.com/toni-morrison-the-bluest-eye-child-pornography/168515/>.

⁷ Macey France, “Common Core Approved Child Pornography,” *Politichicks.tv*, August 20, 2013, accessed September 12, 2013 at <http://politichicks.tv/author/maceyfrance/>.

⁸ Jaclyn Allen, “Broomfield parents petition to remove ‘The Bluest Eye’ from approved reading list,” *7News Denver*, July 11, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/local-news/broomfield-parents-petition-to-remove-the-bluest-eye-from-approved-reading-list>.

president, former U.S. Senator Jim DeMint, said in 2010 that an ‘openly homosexual’ person or sexually active unmarried woman should not be allowed to teach.⁹

Two other national Religious Right organizations, the FRC and One Million Moms (an advocacy arm of the AFA), weighed in with their own objections.

“This book is no different than pornography,” Monica Cole, director of One Million Moms, told the *Christian Post*.¹⁰ One Million Moms gained notoriety for vigorously attacking the selection of openly gay actress Ellen DeGeneres as JC Penney’s spokesperson throughout 2012, and sustains ongoing outrage toward sexually explicit or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)-friendly television shows, movies, and even comic books.¹¹ Conveying a similar mentality regarding *The Bluest Eye*, right-wing pundit Glenn Beck’s website *The Blaze* headlined its own denunciation, “Pedophilia, Incest, and Graphic Sex: Excerpts from a Common Core Reading List Book for 11th-Graders That Will Make You Blush.”¹²

Peter Sprigg, senior fellow for policy studies at FRC, used more moderate terms in calling Morrison’s book inappropriate for schools to teach. He also declared legitimate the parental fear that Common Core “will not leave room for community standards to be applied—especially moral community standards.”¹³ Yet both the AFA’s and FRC’s representatives indicated that the organizations had not taken a stance against Common Core.

In **Alabama**, opposition to *The Bluest Eye* found leadership in State Senator Bill Holtzclaw, a Republican who initially defended the Common Core and even worked to block its repeal in the state legislature. Needing to burnish his conservative credentials, Holtzclaw found his salvation in denouncing Morrison’s novel and demanding that it be explicitly banned from Alabama public schools. Allies such as the Alabama Federation of Republican Women warmed to his crusade,

⁹ Amanda Terkel, “Sen. Jim DeMint: Gays And Unmarried, Pregnant Women Should Not Teach Public School,” *Huffington Post*, October 2, 2010, accessed August 20, 2014 at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/02/demint-gays-unmarried-pregnant-women-teachers_n_748131.html.

¹⁰ Miranda Blue, “AFA Wants Toni Morrison’s Pornography Censored From Common Core,” *Right Wing Watch*, August 30, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/afa-wants-toni-morrisons-pornography-censored-common-core>.

¹¹ Deron Dalton, “One Million Moms’ Top 10 Anti-Gay Rants of the Year,” *Huffington Post*, December 15, 2012, accessed August 20, 2014 at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/deron-dalton/one-million-moms-top-10-anti-gay-rants-of-the-year_b_2304656.html.

¹² Mike Opelka, “Pedophilia, Incest, and Graphic Sex: Excerpts from a Common Core Reading List Book for 11th-Graders That Will Make You Blush,” *The Blaze*, August 22, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2013/08/22/pedophilia-incest-and-graphic-sex-excerpts-from-a-common-core-reading-list-book-for-11th-graders-that-will-make-you-blush/>.

¹³ Blue, “AFA Wants Toni Morrison’s ...”

asking “Is it appropriate for Alabama high school students to [discuss] a pornographic book about rape and incest?”¹⁴

Meanwhile, in **Ohio**, State Board of Education President Debe Terhar spearheaded the charge to label *The Bluest Eye* ‘pornographic,’ provoking Toni Morrison herself to weigh in on the controversy at the beginning of the 2013-14 school year. Responding to Terhar’s censorship attempt, Morrison complained:

“I resent it. I mean if it's Texas or North Carolina as it has been in all sorts of states, but to be a girl from Ohio, writing about Ohio ... And actually relating as an Ohio person, to have the Ohio, what—Board of Education?— [attempt to ban the book] is ironic at the least.”¹⁵

The Southern Poverty Law Center has spoken out in defense of the novel and its inclusion on the Common Core recommended reading list. Maureen Costello, director of the SPLC’s Teaching Tolerance project, noted that sexually frank fiction is hardly a new challenge for teachers. As she told *Education Week*, “teachers, as professionals, should be trusted to handle that.”¹⁶

The Bluest Eye is not the only book on the Common Core recommended reading list to stir up the opposition. In **Arizona**, *Dreaming in Cuban*, a book set during the Cuban Revolution, was pulled from classrooms in Sierra Vista, a district about 70 miles from Tucson, following parent complaints about sexually explicit content. A blogger for the Education Action Group (EAG) Foundation, an anti-Common Core group whose material also appears on Glenn Beck’s website *The Blaze*, wrote that in place of classic literature, “offensive, sexualized books such as *Dreaming in Cuban* will take over students’ classrooms (and their minds).” Blogger Donna Garner continued,

“Not only are such books highly offensive to those who hold traditional values (e.g., belief in personal responsibility, self-discipline, respect for authority, self-control, a solid work ethic, respect for other people, traditional marriage), but they also serve a purpose for those who are trying to indoctrinate this and future generations to hate America and to trash American exceptionalism. A steady diet of portraying

¹⁴ “‘The Bluest Eye’ Novel About Rape and Incest Is The Latest Controversy Over Common Core,” *News.gnom.es*, September 4, 2013, accessed September 12, 2013 at <http://news.gnom.es/pr/the-bluest-eye-novel-about-rape-and-incest-is-the-latest-controversy-over-common-core>.

¹⁵ Nadia Bashir, “Controversy Brews Over Official Comments About Author,” *NBC4i.com*, September 12, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.nbc4i.com/story/23417986/controversy-brews-after-state-officials-comments>.

¹⁶ Anthony Rebor, “‘Bluest Eye’ Becomes Common-Core Flash Point,” *Education Week Teacher*, September 3, 2013, accessed September 12, 2013 at http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching_now/2013/09/bluest_eye_becomes_common-core_flashpoint.html.

ethnic/racial characters always as victims and saturating these books with gutter language is bound to warp students' minds."¹⁷

The Eagle Forum also criticized *The Bluest Eye* and *Dreaming in Cuban* in an article titled "Controversy and Porn Pervade Common Core Curriculum."¹⁸ But unlike Morrison's much-banned *The Bluest Eye*, *Dreaming in Cuban*, first published in 1992, has no record of similar controversy according to the American Library Association. Cuban-American author Cristina Garcia even offered to visit the Sierra Vista school district to answer questions about her fiction, saying, "Many works, not just mine, are misinterpreted or misguidedly banned because of the limitations and short-sightedness of a few."¹⁹

The Eagle Forum and EAG generated another controversy in Newburgh, **New York**, over sexually explicit content in a book included on the district's list of 9th grade reading materials compliant with Common Core English standards. The offending book, *Black Swan Green* by British author David Mitchell, was targeted for passages in which the narrator, a 13-year-old boy, describes a sexual act and also his father's genitalia. EAG editorialized, "If our school leaders aren't capable of screening out the sexually charged garbage, how in the world will they ever catch all the politically charged, left-wing propaganda that's being peddled to schools under the guise of Common Core?"²⁰

The Catholic neo-conservative publication *Crisis* magazine, which published one of Phyllis Schlafly's attacks on Common Core, lent its voice to the charge of sexualizing children and added the young adult novel *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Euwer Wolff to their blacklist. Mary Jo Anderson, a writer for *Crisis* and the far-Right *World Net Daily*, reported that an organization which promotes Common Core to Catholic schools removed the children's books *The Family Book* by Todd Parr and *Who's in a Family* by Robert Skutch from its website following protests against the depiction of non-traditional families and same-sex parents.²¹

¹⁷ Donna Garner, "10th grade class reads erotic novel recommended by Common Core proponents," *EAG News*, September 11, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://eagnews.org/10th-grade-class-reads-erotic-novel-recommended-by-common-core-proponents/>.

¹⁸ Eagle Forum, "Controversy and Porn Pervade Common Core Curriculum," January 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.eagleforum.org/publications/educate/jan14/controversy-porn-pervade-common-core-curriculum.html>.

¹⁹ Associated Press, "Complaints of 'sexually graphic material' leads to Arizona HS pulling acclaimed novel by Latina author," *NBC Latino*, September 13, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://nbclatino.com/2013/09/13/arizona-high-school-pulls-acclaimed-novel-by-latina-author-from-curriculum/>.

²⁰ Ben Velderman, "New York teachers condemn Common Core-approved novel for its blatant 'porno' content," *EAG News*, October 31, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://eagnews.org/new-york-teachers-condemn-common-core-approved-book-as-pornographic/>.

²¹ Mary Jo Anderson, "Common Core Sexualizes American School Children," *Crisis Magazine*, December 17, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2013/common-core-sexualizes-american-school-children>.

However, conservatives don't need a specific book to appear on a Common Core reading list to use sexuality education to stir up outrage at Common Core. In the Francis Howell School District in **Missouri**, a half hour's drive from St. Louis in the county of St. Charles, the 2013-14 school year ended with a battle over access to the e-book version of *It's Perfectly Normal* in a middle school library.

Intended for 10 to 14-year-olds, when the illustrated book by Robie Harris was published in 1994, a review in *Publishers Weekly* praised it as

“intelligent, amiable and carefully researched [; it] frankly explains the physical, psychological, emotional and social changes that occur during puberty [and the] watercolor and pencil art reinforces [the] message that bodies come in all sizes, shapes and colors-and that each variation is ‘perfectly normal.’”²²

Acquired at the district's Barnwell Middle School just this past school year, it was made available only in e-book format at the school library. It was not part of the required reading of the school district curriculum, nor was it listed as a recommended book for any course or subject. School policy has long ensured that if a parent wishes their child to not have access to a specific book in the library, the school will honor the parent's request.

But that wasn't enough for parent Tim Schmidt, who filed a formal request to prohibit access to the book for everyone's children. Schmidt contacted the principal “to raise my concerns about the appropriateness of this book [which] also gives detailed instructions on how to engage in sexual acts and how to masturbate. It also endorses homosexuality... While I am not typically and [sic] activist on these sorts of things, this one hits close to home knowing that my children may be exposed to this sort of rubbish.”²³

"It has a lot of explicit drawings," Schmidt warned. "Cartoon images, life-like cartoon images. A look of nudity. It actually shows people having sex... Most of the time, when I showed this to parents, their jaws just hit the floor... They were shocked and then their next reaction was outrage."²⁴

The controversy over the e-book was fueled by former *Saturday Night Live* cast member and current Tea Party activist Victoria Jackson, whose Facebook page became an organizing ground for opponents who recommended sharing on sites like Missouri Moms Against Common Core and Patriots Against Common Core. In turn, the Tea Party shares values with the Religious

²² Book Review: “It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health,” *Publishers Weekly* January 29, 1996, accessed May 12, 2014 at <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-56402-159-5>.

²³ Victoria Jackson Facebook page, accessed May 9, 2014 at https://www.facebook.com/victoriajackson?ref=stream&hc_location=stream&filter=2.

²⁴ Christina Coleman, “Some parents angry about graphic sex education book,” *USA Today*, May 6, 2014, accessed May 12, 2014 at <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/05/06/parents-angry-graphic-sex-education-book/8755185/>.

Right, as documented by the Public Religion Research Institute,²⁵ and work in common on culture war issues such as opposition to LGBT rights, as Political Research Associates has explained.²⁶

Comments from Facebook readers indicated that several believed the *It's Perfectly Normal* e-book was a conspiracy with ties to the Common Core. A Facebook follower named Shana Schmidt commented, "Did you share this on any of the Common Core-related sites such as MCACC or the Facebook site Missouri Moms Against Common Core or Missouri Education Watchdog?" Another, whose identifier was TimandGudrun Hinderberger, commented, "You are welcome to share this on PATRIOTS AGAINST COMMON CORE on FB."²⁷

First published in 1994, *It's Perfectly Normal* secured 13th place on the American Library Association's most frequently challenged books list for the 1990s. It achieved the coveted title of most frequently challenged book in 2005, attacked for themes including "abortion, homosexuality, nudity, religious viewpoint, sex education, unsuited to age group."²⁸ So, while *It's Perfectly Normal* is now being conflated with the Common Core, it has a long history of opposition by the Religious Right.

For example, the June 2006 *AFA Journal* covered an attempt in Fayetteville, **Arkansas**, to ban *It's Perfectly Normal* in an article headlined "Poison in Our Libraries."²⁹ Founded by Donald Wildmon in 1977 as the National Federation for Decency, the AFA has long targeted what it deems obscenity in popular culture, attacking TV shows (and well-known sponsors such as Burger King and Macy's) for moral offenses such as depiction of homosexuality, premarital sex, and other sexual or "blasphemous" content. The *AFA Journal* article on Fayetteville decried the school system's refusal to remove the book, and other books with "sexually explicit content," from the unrestricted section of the library as a violation of parents' "constitutional rights to oversee the education of their children." (Conveniently, the book is accessible as a [PDF of selected pages](#) from one of AFA's affiliates, the Illinois Family Institute, whose motive is to shock and dismay.) Echoing these perennial themes, today's Common Core opponents similarly denounce national educational standards for English and math as a violation of parents' rights.

In 2007, the American Life League, a conservative Catholic organization opposed to abortion rights, released a video denouncing *It's Perfectly Normal* as "Planned Parenthood-endorsed

²⁵ Public Religion Research Institute, "2013 American Values Survey: In Search of Libertarians in America," October 29, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://publicreligion.org/research/2013/10/2013-american-values-survey/>.

²⁶ Pam Chamberlain, "It's Their Party: How the Tea Party Sustains the Anti-LGBT Right," April 1, 2012, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.politicalresearch.org/2012/04/01/its-their-party-how-the-tea-party-sustains-the-anti-lgbt-right/>.

²⁷ Victoria Jackson Facebook page.

²⁸ American Library Association, Top Ten Challenged Books Lists by Year: 200-2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10#toptenlists>.

²⁹ Steve Crampton, "Poison in our libraries," *American Family Association Journal*, June 2006, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.afajournal.org/2006/june/0606libraries.html>.

pornography.”³⁰ The charge of Planned Parenthood endorsement is familiar code to members of the Religious Right, a symbol of all that is wrong with sexual morality in the United States. For the 2013-14 school year, the state director of the American Family Association of Kansas and Missouri, Phillip Cosby, weighed in on the Francis Howell School District controversy in similar terms,

“This booklet, endorsed by Planned Parenthood, is another example of over the top obscenity and child porn that schools recklessly expose ever-younger audiences, destroying innocence and modesty...[it] is beyond bad taste and offensive; it is pornographic and harmful to children. The words, acts and graphic pictures would be unlawful if anyone else distributed them to children.”³¹

The Heritage Foundation and FRC also weighed in on this recent stir. FRC’s Peter Sprigg told *Life Site News* that parents should be concerned about access to the e-book, arguing, “Even the title itself communicates a sort of moral relativism regarding sex, which is undoubtedly in conflict with what most parents want to teach their children on the subject.”³² FRC is one of the largest Religious Right advocacy organizations in the country and hosts the annual Values Voter Summit, which brings together conservative politicians and leaders and grassroots activists. The organization promotes abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, “maintains that contraceptive-based or comprehensive sex education is destructive,” and in 2013 stepped into the gap left by the dissolution of Exodus International by forming two new ex-gay groups advocating harmful ‘reparative’ conversion therapy.³³

Despite all this controversy, Tim Schmidt, the original complainant in Missouri, reported that his formal request for the e-book’s removal was voted down unanimously by a 10-person review panel. Other parents in the Francis Howell School District, such as June Tiller, defended *It’s Perfectly Normal* and supported keeping the e-book available: “I feel like if the school teaches them [the students] this, and they have this information available, it’s very important, and it will help keep them safe.”³⁴

³⁰ American Life League, “Sex Book for Children,” August 25, 2008, accessed on August 20, 2014 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42fP58EcBuY>.

³¹ Dustin Siggins, “Missouri parents outraged over pornographic, pro-abortion sex ed book in school library,” *LifeSiteNews.com*, May 8, 2014, accessed May 12, 2014 at <http://www.lifesitenews.com/news/missouri-parents-outraged-over-pornographic-pro-abortion-sex-ed-book-in-sch/>.

³² Ibid.

³³ SIECUS, “National Opponents of Comprehensive Sexuality Education,” accessed August 20, 2014 at http://www.communityactionkit.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewPage&pageId=920#_edn18

³⁴ Coleman, “Some parents angry...”

Religious Right in Secular Drag: No to Condoms, No to Curricula

As in past years, conservative organizations promoting abstinence-only-until-marriage programs attempted to derail any attempts at more comprehensive sexuality education or contraceptive access for youth. A little digging revealed the interference of Religious Right advocacy organizations in controversies that at first report appeared to be led only by secular ‘concerned’ parents with no particular agenda beyond their own children’s education.

Thirty miles south of Portland, **Oregon**’s Gervais School District Board came under fire for its unanimous decision to make condoms available—without active parental consent—to students in sixth grade and up starting fall 2014. The vote favoring condom availability came after nine local girls – one of whom was in 7th grade – became pregnant within the last year.

Bryan Fischer of the conservative American Family Association called the planned condom availability program “Russian roulette.” Emphasizing the word “distribution” to mislead the public into thinking that the schools would actively hand out condoms to unsuspecting innocents, Fischer told *Life Site News*, “Condom distribution will simply promote irresponsible sexual activity, which will lead to an increase in unwanted pregnancies and a spike in STDs.” He inaccurately insisted that condoms do not “provide any protection against HPV whatsoever.”³⁵ (Conservative organizations have also blocked HPV vaccination programs in many school districts, similarly arguing that these would increase ‘promiscuity.’) Gervais school officials countered that condom availability would be accompanied by the provision of information about safer sexual practices, including the benefits of abstaining from sexual contact.

Valerie Huber, CEO of the National Abstinence Education Association, argued that “the majority of teens are not having sex, this school ignores this fact and instead normalizes risky behavior as it exchanges ‘risk avoidance’ for the still-risky ‘risk reduction’ message.”³⁶

Yet the high rate of teen pregnancy in Gervais contrasted starkly with Oregon’s statewide strong showing on adolescent sexual health outcomes (thanks to mandates for more-comprehensive sexual health education in schools). Rates of HIV and most other STD transmission in Oregon have been well below the national average, so Gervais, as an outlier, had been of special interest to some researchers.³⁷

Inquiring nurses from the Oregon Health & Science University investigated the discrepancy in 2013, noting the problem of limited access to contraception: there is only one local market in the small town of Gervais that sells condoms, which combines limited availability with adolescent

³⁵ Dustin Siggins, “School district votes to allow teachers to give condoms to students without parental consent,” *LifeSiteNews.com*, June 4, 2014, accessed June 17, 2014 at <http://www.lifesitenews.com/news/school-district-votes-to-allow-teachers-to-give-condoms-to-students-without>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Martha Kempner, “Oregon School District to Distribute Condoms to Middle and High School Students,” *RH Reality Check*, June 2, 2014, accessed June 17, 2014 at <http://rhrealitycheck.org/article/2014/06/02/oregon-school-district-distribute-condoms-middle-high-school-students/>.

fears of maintaining privacy. Of the 40% of teens in the district who reported being sexually active, nearly 1 in 3 admitted to having engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse at least once.³⁸

The school board defended its decision not to require parental consent or notification, believing these to pose a needless barrier to sexually active students' access to prevention resources. Board members pointed to a student survey in which 83% of respondents said that they would be unlikely to discuss contraception with their parents.³⁹ Though opponents of the program voiced concern over "parents' rights," most local parents expressed support for the program.

School board member and local mother Molly McCargar emphasized that "there are no fish bowls or vending machines kids can just grab [condoms from] and go... They will be talked with before walking out with them in hand. Distribution is not an accurate description; access under guidance is what should be stressed."⁴⁰ A mother of four girls, McCargar said that while her family discusses these issues, "unfortunately, not all of our kids have that support at home."⁴¹

Reminding Gervais School District parents that their responsibilities would not end with the advent of condom availability, one local news editorial concluded:

"Clearly, as a parent, you want to be the one who discusses sexuality and contraceptives with your child. The problem is that parents don't seem to be doing that... The decision to have sex is ultimately up to the teen. The parent's purview can only go so far... If you as a parent are not happy with the board's decision, then why not have a discussion with your teen about the issue and what is expected of him or her?"⁴²

At last notice, the new district superintendent had requested a delay in implementing what he considered to be a program unlike any of those in place elsewhere in Oregon. School board members expressed a desire for a more comprehensive plan to address their teen pregnancy and STD transmission problem, thus keeping condoms unavailable for the immediate future.⁴³

³⁸ Lindsay Keefer, "School board defends providing students with condoms," *Woodburn Independent*, June 4, 2014, accessed June 17, 2014 at <http://www.pamplinmedia.com/wbi/152-news/223003-84645-school-board-defends-providing-students-with-condoms>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ "Condoms to be given to sixth-graders in Gervais," *KOIN 6 News*, May 28, 2014, accessed June 17, 2014 at <http://koin.com/2014/05/28/condoms-to-be-given-to-sixth-graders-in-gervais/>.

⁴² "GSB justified in its decision," *Woodburn Independent*, June 4, 2014, accessed June 17, 2014 at <http://www.pamplinmedia.com/wbi/153-opinion/222899-84445-gsb-justified-in-its-decision>.

⁴³ Saerom Yoo, "Gervais school officials step back from condom plan," July 31, 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/news/health/2014/07/31/gervais-school-officials-step-back-condom-plan/13395297/>.

On the other side of the country, an attempt at Ceasar Rodney High School, in Wyoming, **Delaware**, to provide Depo-Provera birth control shots to students was ultimately unsuccessful due to concerns about potential side effects and patient confidentiality. The almost 100% effective Depo shot was proposed by the retiring school board president to provide an alternative for sexually active girls worried about forgetting to take their oral contraceptive pill. The local school board ultimately voted down the plan to make Depo available, citing concerns over side effects and parental notification.⁴⁴

In **Illinois**, NAEA's Valerie Huber, the Illinois Family Institute (an AFA state affiliate), and the FRC denounced Chicago Public Schools' (CPS) decision to implement sexuality education beginning in kindergarten. Developed by the CPS Office of Student Health and Wellness, the policy was developed to align health instruction in local public schools with the National HIV/AIDS Strategy and the *National Sexuality Education Standards*.^{45,46} President Barack Obama's support for beginning sex education in kindergarten has only provided extra fodder for conservative outrage, especially given Obama's Chicago political roots.⁴⁷

The new Chicago mandate, to be implemented by 2016, calls for 300 minutes (or approximately 30 minutes per month) of sexual and health education for students throughout the school year. Using age-appropriate material and language, the new approach will cover topics such as appropriate and inappropriate touch, family diversity, bullying, and anatomically correct words for all the body parts. As students advance through middle and high school, they will learn accurate terms related to sexual orientation and gender identity. An opt-out provision will allow parents to exclude their child from some lessons by providing prior notification to CPS.⁴⁸

Some conservative voices alleged that the instructional program was a plot to “normalize homosexuality.”⁴⁹ The conservative publication *Life News* covered the story by alleging that CPS

⁴⁴ Sarah Barbon, “Ceasar Rodney school board nixes bith control shot for students,” *Dover Post*, June 19, 2014, accessed July 2, 2014 at <http://www.doverpost.com/article/20140619/News/140619669>.

⁴⁵ “CPS Mandates Sexual, Health Education for Kindergarten,” *CBS Chicago*, August 29, 2013, accessed September 30, 2013 at <http://chicago.cbslocal.com/2013/08/29/cps-mandates-sexual-health-education-for-kindergartners/>.

⁴⁶ “Chicago Board of Education to Consider Proposed New Health Education Policy,” Press Release, Chicago Public Schools, February 25, 2013, accessed October 1, 2013 at http://www.cps.edu/News/Press_releases/Pages/PR1_2_25_2013.aspx.

⁴⁷ Steven Ertelt, “Obama Agreed With Mandating Sex Ed Classes for Kindergarten Students,” *LifeNews.com*, September 2, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.lifenews.com/2013/09/02/obama-agreed-with-mandating-sex-ed-classes-for-kindergarten-students/>.

⁴⁸ Jeff Morris, “Sex Education to Be Offered for Chicago Kindergarteners,” *WCHS Eyewitness Local News*, September 3, 2013, accessed September 30, 2013 at http://www.wchstv.com/newsroom/eyewitness/130903_18766.shtml.

⁴⁹ “CPS Mandates...”

had “caused a furor” across the city, and linked sexuality education to Planned Parenthood and President Obama: “Obama first noted that he had worked with Planned Parenthood to push a sex education bill when he served in the Illinois state legislature.”⁵⁰

“They’re very much pushing an extreme agenda across the board, both to normalize sex and begin the conversation earlier,” NAEA’s Huber told *Baptist Press*. She claimed that a survey commissioned by NAEA found parents opposed current sexuality education policy in U.S. schools and supported her organization’s abstinence-only-until-marriage approach that stresses the dangers of contraceptive risk. She said parents were “supportive of sexual risk avoidance abstinence education, the way we cover topics” while policymakers “are totally out of step with what parents want and certainly what’s in the best interest of young people, whether they’re kindergartners or teenagers.”⁵¹

FRC’s Peter Sprigg reinforced Huber’s warnings, telling the *Christian Post*, “The idea that [sexuality education] should be introduced earlier is part of the legacy of Alfred Kinsey, and the belief that ‘children are sexual from birth’... This is a false and pernicious idea that introduces words, thoughts, and concepts to children long before it is developmentally appropriate for them. This premature exposure may contribute to early sexual activity, when we should be working to prevent it.”⁵²

Sprigg further claimed that in discussing sexual orientation, a political agenda is “nearly inevitable... with the goal of forcing acceptance of homosexual and transgender behaviors, often in conflict with parental and community standards.”⁵³

Laurie Higgins of the Illinois Family Institute was similarly melodramatic, buttressing Huber and Sprigg by attacking “comprehensive sex ed dogmatists [who] believe it’s appropriate for kindergartners to learn about families that are headed by homosexuals, whereas many parents believe that no child in early elementary school should hear anything about homosexuality. What’s worse, comprehensive sex ed proponents will present these disordered family structures positively.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Ertelt, “Obama Agreed With...”

⁵¹ Erin Roach, “Sex-ed for kindergartners mandated in Chicago,” *Baptist Press*, March 11, 2013, accessed August 20, 2013 at <http://www.bpnews.net/printerfriendly.asp?id=39854>.

⁵² Melissa Barnhart, “Chicago Public Schools Expand Sex Ed to Include Kindergartners,” *Christian Post*, March 12, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.christianpost.com/news/chicago-public-schools-expand-sex-ed-to-include-kindergartners-91755/>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Dave Bohon. “Chicago Public Schools to Start Sex Education in Kindergarten,” *The New American*, March 14, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.thenewamerican.com/culture/faith-and-morals/item/14786-chicago-public-schools-to-start-sex-education-in-kindergarten?tmpl=component>.

Higgins attacked the *National Sexuality Education Standards* as a plan to “usurp local control and impose liberal assumptions about sexuality on our nation’s children.”⁵⁵ While not conflating NSES with the Common Core standards in this particular instance, her rhetoric of top-down control was consistent with her general arguments against the Common Core.⁵⁶

In contrast to the doomsday scenarios forecast by NAEA, FRC, and AFA and its affiliates, many other school stakeholders have expressed support for Chicago’s more comprehensive approach. Barbara Byrd-Bennett, CPS Chief Executive Officer, defended the changes: “By implementing a new sexual health education policy, we will be helping [students] to build a foundation of knowledge that can guide them not just in the preadolescent and adolescent years, but throughout their lives.”⁵⁷ Ayesha Ahmad, a parent in the school district, commented, “I’m OK with it. I’d like to believe it’s not necessary, but I think our culture dictates you can’t start early enough.”⁵⁸

In eastern **Kansas**, one parent’s disapproval of a poster used in a middle school sexual health class threatened severe statewide consequences, triggering the introduction of a parental consent bill in the state legislature as well as proposals to make it easier to prosecute teachers for exposing students to harmful material. Hocker Grove Middle School, located in the Kansas City suburb of Shawnee Mission, became the epicenter of a controversy with implications for all the 293 school districts across the state.

The poster, titled “How Do People Express Their Sexual Feelings?” listed terms from hugging and kissing to grinding and anal sex. A spokesperson for the Shawnee Mission School District, Leigh Anne Neal, explained the role of the poster in the context of the district’s sexuality education curriculum which she described as ‘abstinence-based’:

“The poster that you reference is actually part of our middle school health and science materials, and so it is a part of our district approved curriculum... However the item is meant to be part of a lesson, and so certainly as a standalone poster without the context of a teacher-led discussion, I could see that there might be some cause for concern... The curriculum it is a part of, it aligns with national standards around those topics, and it’s part of our curriculum in the school district.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Laurie Higgins, “Concerns About Common Core (Part 1),” Illinois Family Institute, August 27, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://illinoisfamily.org/education/concerns-about-common-core-part-1/>.

⁵⁷ Jeff Morris, “Sex Education to Be Offered...”

⁵⁸ “CPS Mandates...”

⁵⁹ Abby Eden, “Father upset with terms on school’s sexual education poster,” *Fox4KC.com*, January 14, 2014, accessed January 22, 2014 at <http://fox4kc.com/2014/01/14/father-upset-with-terms-on-schools-sexual-education-poster/>.

One student commented, “We all started laughing obviously because of the terms... We all know them. We’re 13. We need to know anyways.”⁶⁰ Her mother, Jennifer Wantland, agreed: “She needs to know the correct terms... We need to stop living in a 1950s dreamland, honestly. We can’t be leading our children into this world with blinders on.”⁶¹

But Mark Ellis, father of a 13-year-old at the school, reached out to the AFA for support in removing the poster, which he deemed “too graphic.”⁶² The controversy led to the poster’s removal pending review, and the introduction of two bills in early 2014 by Republican State Senator Mary Pilcher-Cook.

State Senate Bill (SB) 376 would have required parental opt-in for sexuality education, while SB 401 would have gutted the protections for educators against prosecution for teaching controversial material. If state law were changed to remove the defense of artistic merit or significance, any local community insisting on its own “standards” of obscenity could prosecute an educator for exposing students to “offensive” materials. Advocating for SB 401, Pilcher-Cook claimed, “Right now if a teacher were to give pornography (to a student) ... it is not likely at all that a prosecutor would take the case because there is such a high hurdle protecting our schools.”⁶³

Philip Cosby, state director for the American Family Association of Kansas and Missouri, called the current state law protecting teachers “a chilling hurdle for any prosecutor or any grand jury or any person who wants to question educators in Kansas... It almost translates to the word ‘license.’”⁶⁴ Testifying before the Kansas State Senate, Cosby said this measure would allow citizens to “not just wring their hands about what’s happening, but they could actually bring charges against educators for what is the community standard for that and talk about obscenity and measure that.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Garrett Haake, “Poster fuels debate: How should teens be taught about sex?” *KSHB.com 41 Action News*, January 17, 2014, accessed January 22, 2014 at http://www.kshb.com/dpp/news/local_news/poster-fuels-debate-how-should-teens-be-taught-about-sex.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Craig Andres, “Senate bill could lead to massive censorship,” *KSN.com*, February 27, 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://ksn.com/2014/02/27/senate-bill-could-lead-to-massive-censorship/>.

⁶³ Suzanne Perez Tobias and Bryan Lowry, “Kansas Senate weighs bill to ease prosecution of teachers over offensive materials,” *Wichita Eagle*, March 11, 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://eproduct.kansas.com/news/article1135798.html>.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Bob Kellogg, “Accountability coming to Kansas educators?” *OneNewsNow.com*, March 11, 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at http://onewsnw.com/education/2014/03/11/accountability-coming-to-kansas-educators#.U_TyIKMzLT0.

When the Kansas Senate Judiciary Committee approved this bill, teacher representatives at the Kansas National Education Association argued that it would “purge literature from our schools, censor art classes, and stop field trips,” doing away with the protections that allow books like Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* and Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to survive challenges, and removing intellectual safeguards permitting art teachers to show photos of Michelangelo’s *David*. “Think it’s far-fetched?” asked the Kansas NEA. “The lead proponent of this legislation is the American Family Association in Kansas which has been leading an effort to force the removal of a sculpture of a bare-breasted woman from a public arboretum.”⁶⁶

Fortunately for Kansas educators, this legislation was referred back to committee, where it and the opt-in bill both died. However, Tara Culp-Ressler’s headline at the time on *Think Progress*, “How One Outraged Parent Could End Up Undermining Kansas’ Sex Ed Policy,” sums up the way that the Religious Right’s well-established infrastructure can turn one parent’s objections into a statewide threat affecting all teachers and the quality of all public education.⁶⁷

Anti-abortion activists, who have long found Kansas a hospitable home for organizing, also seized upon the story to allege a link between the poster, Planned Parenthood (which had no role at all in the matter), and demand for abortion. In his coverage of the controversy, *Life News* author Steven Ertelt argued that the district’s sexuality education program was proof that,

“The abortion industry is targeting schoolchildren more frequently with sex education than ever before — something not surprising given that studies show sex education campaigns lead to young women eventually purchasing abortions... That’s why Planned Parenthood, the biggest abortion business in the United States, has pushed so hard to get sex education classes in as many high schools as possible.”⁶⁸

The coverage also directed readers to a Family Research Council lecture, detailing FRC’s belief that Planned Parenthood promotes sex education because, as the “pro-life movement has noted for years... the abortion industry understands the link between teen sex and abortions.”⁶⁹

A similar incident in a less conservative state, where outraged parents did not enlist the aid of a Religious Right heavy-hitter, faded out without involving state legislators. Parents in San Marcos, **California**—just north of San Diego—objected to an activity at Woodland Park Middle School in which students were directed to stand under signs that read “smile” “hug” “kiss” “above the waist” “below the waist” or “all the way,” to express how far they thought

⁶⁶ Kansas National Education Association, “Cover up the art and shutter the library!” February 26, 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at http://www.knea.org/assets/document/KS/UTD2_26.pdf.

⁶⁷ Tara Culp-Ressler, “How One Outraged Parent could End Up Undermining Kansas’ Sex Ed Policy,” *Think Progress*, February 19, 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2014/02/19/3307341/kansas-sex-parent/>.

⁶⁸ Steven Ertelt, “Middle School Under Fire for Classroom Poster Listing Sex Acts,” *LifeNews.com*, January 16, 2014, accessed January 22, 2014 at <http://www.lifenews.com/2014/01/16/middle-school-under-fire-for-classroom-poster-listing-sex-acts/>.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

appropriate for middle schoolers to ‘go’ sexually. One local girl claimed that the students thought they were being asked how far *they* have actually gone and were willing to go sexually. The parents of the girl contacted their local ABC news channel to publicize their opinion that the embarrassment and confusion the students felt because of the lesson is “just another reason why [sex education] shouldn't even be in the schools.”⁷⁰

Woodland Park’s principal Brian Randall did not apologize for the activity, explaining that “the purpose of the lesson was to open the lines of communication between parents and students about dating expectations,” which certainly has happened as a result of these parents’ uproar.⁷¹ According to Randall, the dating lesson which took place in a “family life and health class” came from a third-party community clinic which has taught sexuality education at the school for the past few years. The San Marcos school board switched from an abstinence-only to “abstinence-plus” sexuality education curriculum in 2010.⁷² The principal said that the curriculum materials are available to parents before lessons begin and that parents sign permission slips.

Opposition Attacks Planned Parenthood in a FLASH

Attacking Planned Parenthood is one of the most consistent traditions cherished by abstinence-only-until-marriage advocates, even when Planned Parenthood’s connections to a sexuality education controversy are tenuous or nonexistent. In the conservative Tempe Union High School District, near Phoenix, **Arizona**, some community members vehemently objected to school administrators’ plans to improve adolescent sexual health, which involved Planned Parenthood of Arizona’s participation in a review committee considering sexuality education curricula for the district. More than 70 people attended a heated February 2014 school Governing Board meeting, nearly all identifying themselves as opposed to the involvement of an organization they believe is promoter of “abortion and sexual promiscuity.”⁷³ Two local crisis pregnancy centers, Tempe’s Aid to Women Center and First Way Pregnancy Center, also sent representatives, while the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) attacked Planned Parenthood on multiple fronts.

ADF, originally called the Alliance Defense Fund, was created by a cadre of Religious Right leaders including James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, and Donald Wildmon, founder of the American Family Association, to provide legal support to advance conservative ‘family values.’ ADF’s website states that, “Alliance Defending Freedom is on the front lines leading efforts to expose Planned Parenthood—America’s largest abortion provider—which is more

⁷⁰ Kandiss Crone, “Parents outraged over sex education lesson,” *ABC10 News*, June 4, 2014, accessed June 30, 2014 at <http://www.10news.com/news/parents-san-marcos-sex-ed-class-inappropriate-uncomfortable>.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Bill Peterson and Sean Batura, “San Marcos CISD trustees adopt ‘abstinence plus,’” *San Marcos Mercury*, July 19, 2010, accessed June 30, 2014 at <http://smmercury.com/2010/07/20/san-marcos-cisd-trustees-vote-to-adopt-abstinence-plus/>.

⁷³ Dexter Duggan, “Planned Parenthood not popular with Tempe schools’ sex-ed meeting audience,” *Arizona Daily Independent*, February 5, 2014, accessed May 19, 2014 at <http://www.arizonadailyindependent.com/2014/02/05/planned-parenthood-not-popular-with-tempe-schools-sex-ed-meeting-audience/>.

concerned with its bottom line than the health of women.”⁷⁴

ADF litigation counsel Natalie Decker commented, “Schoolchildren should be able to have a healthy education free from influence by Planned Parenthood’s abortion marketing campaign.”⁷⁵ ADF issued two letters regarding the controversy, one asking a school Governing Board member with ties to Planned Parenthood to be recused, another accusing Planned Parenthood of lying about its role in the local curriculum selection and its services.

One of the “facts” presented in the second letter reads, “PLANNED PARENTHOOD FEDERATION OF AMERICA AND ITS AFFILIATES TARGET CHILDREN, LEAD THEM TO EXPERIMENT IN SEXUAL PRACTICES, USE CONTRACEPTIVE DEVICES AND ABORTIFACIENTS, OBTAIN STD TESTS, AND THEN PROVIDE THEM WITH ABORTIONS WHEN THEY INEVITABLY GET PREGNANT [sic].”⁷⁶ As “evidence,” the letter points to a Planned Parenthood of Arizona billboard near a junior high school, which depicted a condom and the tagline “Get It On for Free.”

This billboard campaign, intended to “normalize condoms,” also ignited controversy in Memphis, **Tennessee**, where opponents protested the advertisement’s proximity to a local elementary school.⁷⁷ ADF condemned this and alleged other Planned Parenthood outrages in a July 24, 2014 press conference statement and demanded a state investigation of the Arizona affiliate.⁷⁸

Despite this opposition, Tempe Union’s Governing Board voted 3-2 to adopt Public Health--Seattle & King County’s (WA) program *Family Life and Sexual Health (FLASH)* as a framework, with plans to use it only for developing district-specific lesson plans. Among the other options, the Board rejected the abstinence-only-until-marriage program *Choosing the Best*.

⁷⁴ Catherine Holland, “Local faith-based group using new law to demand Planned Parenthood investigation,” *Azfamily.com*, July 24, 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.azfamily.com/news/Local-faith-based-group-demands-Planned-Parenthood-investigation-under-new-law-268490172.html>.

⁷⁵ Alliance Defending Freedom, “Arizona School District May Violate State Law to Allow Planned Parenthood Sex-Ed Class,” *LifeNews.com*, March 6, 2014, accessed May 8, 2014 at <http://www.lifenews.com/2014/03/06/arizona-school-district-may-violate-state-law-to-allow-planned-parenthood-sex-ed-class/?pr=1>.

⁷⁶ Alliance Defending Freedom, letter to Bryan S. Howard “RE: Planned Parenthood’s Response to Parental Opposition to Inviting Planned Parenthood into Tempe Union School District Schools,” March 6, 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.adfmedia.org/files/TUHSD-PPAZletter.pdf>.

⁷⁷ SIECUS, “Tennessee: Elementary Flap over Condom Awareness Billboard,” February 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Feature.showFeature&featureID=2329>.

⁷⁸ Alliance Defending Freedom, “STATEMENT OF ADF LEGAL COUNSEL NATALIE L. DECKER TEMPE ARIZONA – PRESS CONFERENCE,” July 24, 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.adfmedia.org/files/DeckerStatementPPAZ.pdf>.

Contrary to ADF's allegations, Planned Parenthood of Arizona was not invited to play any role in the ensuing process of creating Tempe Union's new *FLASH*-inspired program or any individual lessons.

Among the supporters of an approach modeled on *FLASH*, parent Diane Hughes best captured the sentiment favoring more comprehensive sexuality education for the district. Hughes, a mother of five, grandmother of thirteen, and great-grandmother of eight, said that schools should provide the facts on all topics, while parents should take responsibility to provide the values "and sex education is no exception. They [students] need to know about potential risks, and they need to know how to protect themselves. ... As parents we set values."⁷⁹

Reading Is Fundamental: Higher Ed Discovers Threats to Watch Out For

Graduating to higher education, two **South Carolina** schools, the publically-funded College of Charleston and the University of South Carolina-Upstate in Spartanburg, nearly lost \$70,000 in state funding because of conservative opposition to two book assignments portraying homosexuality.

The Palmetto Family Council, an affiliate of Focus on the Family, launched the effort by attacking the College of Charleston's optional summer reading assignment of the graphic novel *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* to incoming first-year students during summer 2013. *Fun Home*, by Alison Bechdel (author of the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*), reflects on the lesbian author's own sexual orientation and the closeted same-sex relationships of her father, who committed suicide. The attack on serious literary portrayals of LGBT individuals soon expanded to University of South Carolina-Upstate's inclusion of the book *Out Loud: The Best of Rainbow Radio* in its first-year curriculum.⁸⁰

Palmetto Family Council's stated mission is "to transform the culture in South Carolina by reclaiming the values and virtues of marriage, the traditional family model, and sexual purity."⁸¹ The organization's attack paved the way for Republican state representatives to take up the charge and seek punitive cuts to the state-funded colleges' budgets. State Representative Garry Smith led the push for sanctions, warning that *Fun Home* "could be considered pornography" and was "promoting the gay and lesbian lifestyle."⁸²

⁷⁹ Luci Scott, "Tempe school board moves on new sex-ed curriculum," *AZCentral.com*, May 8, 2014, accessed May 19, 2014 at <http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/tempe/2014/05/08/tempe-union-high-school-district-sex-ed/8869901/>.

⁸⁰ "Palmetto Family Group Targets USC-Upstate," *FitsNews*, August 16, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.fitsnews.com/2013/08/16/palmetto-family-group-targets-usc-upstate/>.

⁸¹ "A Shocking Summer Reading Assignment," Palmetto Family, July 24th, 2013, accessed March 5, 2014 at <http://www.palmettofamilylife.com/2013/07/a-shocking-summer-reading-assignemnt/>.

⁸² Jeremy Borden, "College of Charleston responds to 'Fun Home' book controversy," *PostAndCourier.com*, February 20, 2014, accessed March 5, 2014 at

Students at the College of Charleston, which faced \$52,000 in lost funding (the cost of its summer reading program), protested the censorship with rallies of up to 500 students. Professor Charles Korey noted that the College had “recognized that the book might be controversial for a few readers, but the book asks important questions about family, identity, and the transition to adulthood.”⁸³ Democratic State Representative Gilda Cobb-Hunter joined the bill’s opponents by saying legislators “need to stop running a dictatorship forcing people to believe what we believe.”⁸⁴

South Carolina’s House budget-writing committee approved the sanctions by a vote of 13 to 10, but the state Senate restored the schools’ budgets, with a caveat: the colleges were required to offer an alternative reading option and use the funding “for instruction in the provisions and principles of the United States Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Federalist Papers, including the study of and devotion to American institutions and ideals.”⁸⁵ An administrator at the College of Charleston commented on the irony of this, given the First Amendment’s free speech guarantee, and warned of a chilling effect on future reading selections.

“That’s not academic freedom. It’s academic bartering,” denounced Women’s and Gender Studies professor Alison Piepmeier. “They’re saying you can teach what you want as long as you teach what we want you to teach ... LGBT issues are not radical to my students, even students from conservative households.”⁸⁶ *Fun Home* author Alison Bechdel commented, “It’s sad and absurd that the College of Charleston is facing a funding cut for teaching my book – a book which is after all about the toll that this sort of small-mindedness takes on people’s lives.”⁸⁷

<http://www.postandcourier.com/article/20140220/PC1603/140229919/1031/college-of-charleston-responds-to-fun-home-book-controversy>.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Andrew Shain, “SC colleges under fire about book, course choices,” *TheState.com*, February 19, 2014, accessed March 5, 2014 at <http://www.thestate.com/2014/02/19/3278857/sc-colleges-under-fire-about-book.html>.

⁸⁵ Jenna Lyons, “Two S.C. schools’ budgets altered following gay-themed assigned reading controversy,” *USA Today*, July 9, 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://college.usatoday.com/2014/07/09/two-s-c-schools-budgets-altered-following-gay-themed-assigned-reading-controversy/>.

⁸⁶ Harriet McLeod, “South Carolina Senate won’t cut college budgets over gay-themed books,” *Reuters.com*, May 13, 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/13/us-usa-southcarolina-education-idUSBREA4C0YX20140513>.

⁸⁷ Rachel Deahl, “Bechdel Reacts to ‘Fun Home’ Controversy in So. Carolina,” *Publishers Weekly*, February 26, 2014, accessed March 11, 2014 at <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/61201-bechdel-reacts-to-fun-home-controversy-in-so-carolina.html>.

In the face of threats to the school's bottom line, College of Charleston President George Benson stood firm: "Our students are adults, and we will treat them as such. Faculty, not politicians, ultimately must decide what textbooks are selected and how those materials are taught."⁸⁸

Homecoming Tradition Turns Into Royal Controversy

In the 2013-14 school year, SIECUS identified sexuality education controversies in **Florida**, **Pennsylvania**, and **Texas** that all took place around homecoming, that traditional American event marked by football and the selection of a royal court. The conflicts typically began over the symbolism of these events, which have been enshrined in popular movies and mark the pinnacle of some students' high school aspirations. The involvement of alumni often give these incidents added weight and attention, because of alums' potential to impact local sexuality education policies and programs long after homecoming is over.

One of the school year's first such controversies involved the Richland School District in Johnstown, **Pennsylvania**, where allegedly sympathetic administrators invalidated a transgender male student's nomination for homecoming king, claiming that state law was tying their hands. Some of the student's supporters argued that the school board used state law as an excuse to deny him equality and respect.

High School senior Kasey Caron was excited when his peers nominated him to be on the ballot for homecoming court at the annual celebration. According to *The Advocate*, Caron's girlfriend told local news reporters, "He was so excited...Not only because people were accepting him, but he knew he had a good chance of being king, because of all the support he was getting."⁸⁹ Things started out promising, with a school guidance counselor, Missy Stringent, asking Caron his ballot preference—king or queen. But then school administrators got involved claiming that since his birth certificate identified him as female, state law legally bound him to the female-designated queen role.⁹⁰

Caron, a 17-year old drum major and honors student, was born biologically female but identified as male. However, as a legal minor, he was prevented from completing a full legal and clinical transition to male until his 18th birthday; because of this state law, district administrators alleged that altering Caron's gender designation on the homecoming court ballot would not be possible

⁸⁸ Seanna Adcox, "SC House refuses to restore cuts to College of Charleston, USC Upstate for book selections," March 10, 2014, accessed March 11, 2014 at <http://www.therepublic.com/view/story/e1abf9f56db347fa90fbf5e2b50e053b/SC-XGR--SC-Budget>.

⁸⁹ Sunnive Brydum, "Trans Teen Takes on Pa. School to Run for Homecoming King," *Advocate.com*, September 9, 2013, accessed September 12, 2013 at <http://www.advocate.com/politics/transgender/2013/09/09/trans-teen-takes-pa-school-run-homecoming-king>.

⁹⁰ Eric Knopsnyder, "Homecoming Rule Stirs Transgender Debate at Pa. High School," *Newsandtribune.com*, September, 4, 2013, accessed September 12, 2013 at <http://newsandtribune.com/cnhinewsservice-all/x789521042/Homecoming-rule-stirs-transgender-debate-at-Pa-high-school>.

(such claims about state law have not been specified or verified). Caron conveyed his dismay in an editorial:

“Friday [August 30th] I was called into the principal’s office...the principal and vice principal [said they] had removed my name from the male ballot and replaced it onto the female ballot. I was in shock, enraged, and disappointed. It felt like everything I had worked for had been destroyed...I’m going to fight this until I’m on the homecoming court as a male, and I’m officially running for homecoming king.”⁹¹

Despite reported support from over 100 students and community members, the Richland School District Board upheld the high school’s decision to place Caron’s name on the homecoming queen side of the ballot.⁹² The one concession from school administrators permitted Caron to bring a date of his choice to the homecoming activities, of whatever sex; the other homecoming queen nominees were automatically paired with a student on the king side of the ballot (reflecting a bias against gay and bisexual students as well). Later in the school year, Caron received permission to wear male robes for his graduation and to start a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at his school.⁹³

The Human Rights Campaign reported that this disappointing news followed a **California** transgender girl’s successful ascension to homecoming queen—making her the first known transgender homecoming queen in the U.S.⁹⁴ Districts in both **New Hampshire** and **North Carolina** also crowned transgender male homecoming kings in the 2013-14 school year.^{95, 96}

⁹¹ Kasey Caron, “Transgender Student’s Editorial on Richland Homecoming Policy,” *Tribune-democrat.com*, September 4, 2013, accessed September 12, 2013 at <http://tribune-democrat.com/x1253336636/Transgender-students-editorial-on-Richland-homecoming-policy>.

⁹² Pennsylvania Student Equality Coalition, “Associated Press Issues Trans-Insensitive Story on Kasey Caron,” Press Release, September 10, 2013, accessed September 12, 2013 at <http://pennsec.org/associated-press-issues-trans-insensitive-story-on-kasey-caron/>.

⁹³ Sunnive Brydum, “Trans Teen Won’t Be Homecoming King, But Can Start a GSA,” *Advocate.com*, October 30, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.advocate.com/politics/transgender/2013/10/30/trans-teen-wont-be-homecoming-king-can-start-gsa>.

⁹⁴ Eric Cameron, “Pennsylvania School Board Rejects Transgender Student’s Request to Run for Homecoming King,” HRC Blog, September 25, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.hrc.org/blog/entry/pennsylvania-school-board-rejects-transgender-students-request-to-run-for-h>.

⁹⁵ Winnie McCroy, “NH High School Crowns Trans Student as Homecoming King,” *EdgeBoston.com*, October 7, 2013, accessed August 20, 2014 at http://www.edgeboston.com/news/national/news//150281/nh_high_school_crowns_trans_student_as_homecoming_king.

In **Florida** and **Texas**, homecoming controversy erupted over a different issue: condom availability. In both cases, school administrators took seriously what most students saw as only a humorous act, not a deliberate statement about access to methods that promote safer sex (despite the hope of some sexuality education advocates).

At **Florida**'s Mulberry High School in Bartow, Polk County, an hour east of Tampa, teens Montana Fulkerson and Dalton Wiggs lost their spots on the homecoming ballot after providing candy and condoms to potential student voters as part of their election campaign.

Fulkerson and Wiggs decided to make condoms available as a way to stand out among the nineteen other couples running for homecoming king and queen. "We figured promoting safe sex wouldn't be a problem – would be humorous," Fulkerson told local news media. "At the same time, some people found it inappropriate."⁹⁷ During their campaign, she and Wiggs offered student voters a bag filled with candy and condoms, inviting them to reach in and grab what they wanted. The condoms were labeled with a sticker that said, "Let's Wrap This Up."⁹⁸

While school officials originally had barred the students from attending homecoming altogether, they later limited the punishment to not allowing the pair to run for king and queen. They issued a statement, saying: "When school administrators became aware, they immediately instructed the students to stop this inappropriate activity."⁹⁹

Reaction to the school district's decision appeared overwhelmingly supportive of the teens, judging by comments posted to the website for WTSP 10 News. Typical of the comments was this, posted by an adult identified as Crystal Jenae Hollis:

"Where does it say in the rules that they can't pass [condoms] out? They're concerned about their fellow classmates. You want to hide the topic of sex, thinking it is inappropriate and impolite. But the teen years [are] the most important time to talk about sex, protection, options, and what is considered consent. Talking about it can help a teen avoid making crucial and often permanent mistakes."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Matt Comer, "Transgender Charlotte student crowned homecoming king," *GOQ Notes*, February 8, 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://goqnotes.com/27414/transgender-charlotte-student-crowned-homecoming-king/>.

⁹⁷ Isabel Mascarenas, "Mulberry High School Students Montana Fulkerson and Dalton Wiggs Banned from Homecoming After Handing Out Condoms," *WTSP 10 News*, October 7, 2013, accessed October 30, 2013 at <http://www.wtsp.com/news/reporter/article/338574/79/Students-banned-from-homecoming-after-handing-out-condoms>.

⁹⁸ "Polk Teens Banned from Homecoming for Giving Out Condoms," *TBO.com -The Tampa Tribune*, October 4, 2013, accessed October 30, 2013 at <http://tbo.com/news/polk-teens-banned-from-homecoming-for-giving-out-condoms-20131004/>.

⁹⁹ Mascarenas, "Mulberry High School Students..."

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

A further note of irony to the controversy – given the school district’s message that condoms are inappropriate in the context of a social event that encourages romantic coupling – was the fact that Fulkerson had worn a purity ring since seventh grade: “I don’t believe in premarital sex. I don’t believe in just giving yourself up to just anybody.”¹⁰¹

Another homecoming flap in **Texas** involved that almost universal accompaniment to American football: cheerleaders. An entire high school cheerleading squad was benched and suspended for one day in the Houston-area suburb of Wharton after stocking the homecoming “school spirit” bags for varsity football players with condoms. Each year, Wharton High School cheerleaders are tasked with preparing goody bags for the varsity football players before the homecoming game in an effort to raise school spirit.

While some sexuality education advocates hoped that the squad’s infraction was motivated by a desire to raise awareness about unintended pregnancy or STD transmission, most of those involved insisted that the episode was a joke. “They just thought it would be funny...cause they are guys and they are girls ...you know,” said one junior on the drill team.¹⁰² “It was really a prank gone wrong. I guess. It was a harmless prank that went too far,” said another squad member.¹⁰³ Parents were divided on the school administration’s actions, with some supporting the response to “inappropriate” behavior, others arguing they should be able to take a joke.¹⁰⁴

Of course, Texas teenagers could use access to and a serious conversation about practicing safer sex. Over half of Texas high school students have had sexual intercourse, higher than the national average, and the state has some of the nation’s highest teen pregnancy and STD rates.¹⁰⁵

District Superintendent King Davis said that “student discipline decisions are based on state law and the Wharton ISD [Independent School District] Student Code of Conduct,” but remained vague on which specific state law the students’ condom provision violated.¹⁰⁶ State law requires

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² “Wharton High School Cheerleaders Benched after Putting Condoms in Spirit Bags,” *Houston CBS Sports Radio 610*, October 26, 2013, accessed November 13, 2013 at <http://houston.cbslocal.com/2013/10/26/wharton-high-school-cheerleaders-benched-after-putting-condoms-in-spirit-bags/>.

¹⁰³ Jeremy Desel, “Wharton HS Cheerleaders Benched for Putting Condoms in Spirit Bags,” *KHOU.com*, October 25, 2013, accessed November 13, 2013 at <http://www.khou.com/news/local/Wharton-HS-cheerleaders-benched-for-putting-condoms-in-spirit-bags-229319751.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Youth Online: High School YRBS, Texas 2011 Results, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed November 13, 2013 at <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline/App/Results.aspx?LID=TX>.

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin Sharp, “Cheerleaders Miss Bellville Game,” *Wharton Journal-Spectator*, October 30, 2013, accessed November 15, 2013 at http://www.journal-spectator.com/news/article_d4212a64-4196-11e3-bca2-0019bb2963f4.html.

schools to stress abstinence, but permits education on contraception or condoms as long as it discusses “human use reality rates instead of [the] theoretical laboratory rate.”¹⁰⁷

Condom availability frequently faces opposition on both high school and college campuses, especially at schools with religious affiliations. But there was good news this past year for college students matriculating at Georgetown University in the **District of Columbia**, a Catholic institution where the administration allowed a student group to launch a condom delivery service.

The group, H*yas for Choice, proposed to deliver condoms to any student event or party on request, and supplied 30 condoms at its very first party. H*yas for Choice previously offered condoms from 10am to 4pm—conceiving the new party-delivery concept after hearing that condoms “aren’t usually in demand as much just after lunch.”¹⁰⁸ Georgetown’s director of media relations, Rachel Pugh, explained that the student group did not receive university funding or resources, and therefore the university would “respect the rights of our students to join outside groups as individuals.”¹⁰⁹ Students have been able to promote political or ideological causes at odds with the university’s Jesuit philosophy in designated “free-speech zones.”

In support of the project, the student paper *Georgetown Voice* wrote, “In light of Georgetown’s continued refusal to promote contraception as a method of safe sex, the presence of H*yas for Choice on campus is invaluable to the promotion of safe sexual practices among the student body.”¹¹⁰ Opposition to the project, from a student involved with the conservative Catholic Knights of Columbus, argued that “Hoyas do not need more contraception, or a more efficient method of distributing them,” while critiquing the plan for neglecting “the urgent problems of Georgetown’s current hook-up culture, like the high rate of sexual violence committed against women.”¹¹¹

Of Playwrights and Poets: All the World’s a Stage for Censorship

Some people believe that the best art makes people uncomfortable, but the 2013-14 school year demonstrated once again that not everyone likes to feel that discomfort. While high school students in **Arizona** and **Connecticut**—the latter state attracting national attention with two *New*

¹⁰⁷ Texas Education Code §§ 28.004(e)(1)–(5), accessed November 15, 2013 at <http://www.statutes.legis.state.tx.us/Docs/ED/htm/ED.28.htm#28.004>.

¹⁰⁸ Tyler Kingkade, “Georgetown Won’t Try To Stop Condom Delivery Service Launched By H*yas For Choice,” *Huffington Post*, October 24, 2013, accessed November 12, 2013 at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/24/georgetown-condom-delivery_n_4150374.html.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Editorial: “Condom Delivery Service Makes Students Safer,” *Georgetown Voice*, October 16, 2013, accessed November 18, 2013 at <http://georgetownvoice.com/2013/10/16/condom-delivery-service-makes-students-safer/>.

¹¹¹ Jeffrey Lin, “H*yas for Choice Announces New Condom Delivery System,” *Georgetown Voice*, October 17, 2013, accessed November 18, 2013 at <http://georgetownvoice.com/2013/10/17/hyas-choice-announces-new-condom-delivery-system/>.

York Times articles—largely demonstrated the maturity with which students deal with the sexual content of famous plays, parents and administrators were another story. In **Nebraska**, a state association feared the repercussions of reciting LGBTQ-friendly poems on television, while the affected student was left by the adults in his community to fight almost singlehandedly for tolerance toward his poetry selections.

In **Arizona**, some parents found Edward Albee’s absurdist 2002 play *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*, with its exploration of social taboos such as incest, pedophilia, and bestiality, so upsetting, they demanding that the school’s police officer intervene in the drama class. In **Connecticut**, students defended their production of the musical *Rent*, while a **Nebraska** state poetry champion stood firm on his decision to perform poems with LGBTQ content.

Edward Albee’s Tony Award-winning play *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* made headlines for **Arizona** in Scottsdale’s Cave Creek Unified School District in October 2013. At the district’s Cactus Shadows High School, opponents of a drama class reading of the sexually-frank play succeeded in removing the play from the curriculum, temporarily suspending the drama teacher, and exacting a pledge from the school to avoid “any production that is deemed potentially offensive...or anything else deemed too controversial for a high school.”¹¹²

Cactus Shadows drama teacher Andrew Cupo assigned his Advanced Drama class to read the absurdist play about a man who falls in love with a goat. The plot explores social taboos including incest and pedophilia, and challenges its audience to consider the limits of free expression in a so-called liberal society.

Elissa Ericson, head of fine arts at the high school, affirmed that Cupo gave repeated warnings to his students that some might find the material offensive, and offered them other plays as alternatives for the reading assignment. Additionally, Cupo required all students in the class to obtain parental permission at the beginning of the year to study potentially explicit material.¹¹³ Despite these precautions, one student and a small group of parents confronted the school administration to demand removal of Albee’s play from the reading list.

The confrontation was launched when a parent, having first lodged an anonymous complaint, recruited approximately 10 other parents to walk into the principal’s office and demand that the school’s police officer intervene in the teaching of *The Goat*.

A public hearing soon followed, with opponents outnumbered by over 40 students and parents who spoke out in favor of Cupo and the play. Representing the opposition viewpoint, student Emily McAtee and her father Guy explained that the opt-outs and permission forms were irrelevant given the play’s sexual language and themes. In the view of Guy McAtee, “Having

¹¹² Mary Beth Faller, “Cactus Shadows Teacher Suspended Over Play Will Return,” *AZCentral.com*, October 15, 2013, accessed October 30, 2013 at <http://www.azcentral.com/community/scottsdale/articles/20131014scottsdale-teacher-suspended-over-play-will-return.html>.

¹¹³ David Ferguson, “Arizona High School Suspends Drama Teacher Over Play’s Sexual Content,” *Rawstory.com*, October 10, 2013, accessed October 30, 2013 at <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2013/10/10/arizona-high-school-suspends-drama-teacher-over-plays-sexual-content/>.

signed an acknowledgment of the course curriculum is in no way authorization for material of this nature to be approved.”¹¹⁴

Approximately a week later, Cupo was permitted to resume teaching, but *The Goat* was gone. District Superintendent Debbi Burdick released the following statement:

“The district does not in any way condone the use of the controversial play in its curriculum. The teacher did not obtain the permission of any parent or of the administration prior to introducing its mature concepts into the classroom, and the item has been removed from use. The district has instituted procedures to make sure that there is not a repeat of this matter, and the district has followed its personnel policies with respecting to addressing the issue with its staff member.”¹¹⁵

One of Cupo’s drama students, Andrew Rimmer, expressed support for Cupo’s return, along with resignation over the district’s decision to cleanse all controversy from the curriculum:

“I’m a huge supporter of the arts, and with the arts comes discomfort and sometimes outrageousness, and I feel fortunate that we’ve been able to confront these issues with a teacher, and in the future they might not be able to. But I’d rather have (Cupo) than the script.”¹¹⁶

To the discomfort of some, provocative sexual expression characterizes Jonathan Larson’s Pulitzer- and Tony-winning rock opera, *Rent*, first performed on Broadway in 1996, which covers love, drug use, and HIV in the lives of both gay and straight characters. A half-hour drive from New Haven, city of legendary Broadway theater tryouts, the **Connecticut** town of Trumbull found itself divided over cancellation of a planned high school production of the musical. Trumbull High School’s Thespian Society had planned to stage a “school edition,” which cuts out the profanity of the original.

Trumbull High School Principal Marc Guarino cited the lack of a school-wide “plan” for the play’s staging as the reason behind the cancellation.¹¹⁷ Some members of the school community challenged Guarino’s assertion that the cancellation was due only to a lack of adequate planning, and suggested that it was more about school administrators’ fear of *Rent*’s frank sexual content. Thespian Society president Larissa Mark lamented, “Mr. Guarino has told me he’d like to do *Rent* at some point, but needs more of a plan [to involve experts who can speak about HIV and other issues]...But I don’t believe we need more than a year to plan this.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Faller, “Cactus Shadows Teacher Suspended...”

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Aaron Leo, “‘Rent’ Will Go On At THS,” *Trumbull Patch*, December 10, 2013 accessed December 11, 2013 at <http://trumbull.patch.com/groups/schools/p/rent-supporters-praise-herbst-guarino-over-commitment-to-show>.

¹¹⁸ Patrick Healy, “Connecticut High School Cancels Student Production of ‘Rent’,” *New York Times*, December 4, 2013, accessed December 11, 2013 at

Students angered by the principal's decision talked of fomenting a spontaneous "Rentbellion" to express their displeasure. But in her role as Thespian Society president, Mark refrained from stoking the controversy: "I didn't think 'Rentbellion' was going to help our case... We had to create an organized response. I said that students should speak with their parents about this and not act brashly."¹¹⁹ Over the course of two days, students collected 1,516 signatures (roughly two-thirds of the school), and distributed a survey to the Trumbull community to gauge support for the production; over 400 responses were collected. Students also created a Facebook page in support of *Rent*, generating over 4,200 "likes."

The controversy not only caught the attention of local media, but made headlines in the *New York Times*, National Public Radio, and on blogs in the theater world. Blogger Howard Sherman, former Executive Director of the American Theater Wing, shared the reaction of original *Rent* actress Daphne Rubin-Vega, who played the character Mimi on Broadway. Asked whether she thought that *Rent* was too controversial for high schools, she said:

"In this day and age, I can't think of anything more appropriate. It's perfectly designed for high school. To me, a loving awareness of the issues, sexuality, health, AIDS in particular is important. *Rent* is the perfect way to open up dialogue with young people. The cancellation of a production that people have been looking forward to is an obvious sign that our educators don't want to take on the responsibility of educating our young. They'd have to answer questions and they don't want the questions raised."¹²⁰

Guarino responded to the groundswell by reevaluating his decision after speaking with Trumbull High's assistant principals and reviewing the school edition's script. He then issued a letter stating, "The learning opportunities are essential. To plan for these, I will be working collaboratively with various groups."¹²¹ However, he suggested moving the performance dates until the very end of the school year. Several Trumbull parents released a letter praising Guarino's turnaround, but also noted,

"This production had long been planned, and we are confident that it can be ready to go in March [2014] as scheduled so that our children, who have numerous heavily demanding curricular and extracurricular activities later in the

<http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/12/04/connecticut-high-school-cancels-student-production-of-rent/>.

¹¹⁹ BWW News Desk, "Connecticut High School Students Rise Up After Principal Halts Production of RENT," *Broadway World*, November 29, 2013, accessed December 11, 2013 at <http://www.broadwayworld.com/article/Connecticut-High-School-Students-Rise-Up-After-Principal-Halts-Production-of-RENT-20131129>.

¹²⁰ Howard Sherman, "How Not To Cancel Your High School Musical," *HESherman.com*, December 4, 2013, accessed December 18, 2013 at <http://www.hesherman.com/2013/12/04/how-not-to-cancel-your-high-school-musical/>.

¹²¹ Ray Bendici, "'Rent' Production Is Back on at Trumbull High School," *ConnecticutMag.com*, December 10, 2013, accessed December 11, 2013 at <http://www.connecticutmag.com/Blog/Connecticut-Today/November-2013/RENT-Back-on-at-Trumbull-High/>.

year, including...spring athletics and music activities, not to mention AP exams in May and final exams in June, will be able to participate.”¹²²

At long last, Guarino backpedaled even on this matter, and by mid-December 2013 the Facebook page “Trumbull for Rent” announced that the original March 2014 performance dates would be kept. The opening night curtain rose as planned without further serious controversy.

In the Midwest, the **Nebraska** School Activities Association (NSAA) also attempted to pre-empt a performance owing to fears of anticipated controversy, this time taking issue with the LGBTQ-affirming poetry recital of high school senior and state poetry champion Michael Barth.

Barth won a competition for performing spoken poetry at the Nebraska State Speech Championships, with selections including “Swingset” by Andrea Gibson (a poem that challenges conventional gender identity norms) and lyrics from “Same Love” by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis (a song that encourages acceptance of people of all sexual orientations). Ten of Nebraska’s speech champions were to be featured on “Best of the Best,” a broadcast on the state’s public television network, NET. But in April 2014 the NSAA asked Barth to swap his winning poetry selection for content that wouldn’t promote a “personal agenda.”¹²³

While some critics accused Rhonda Blanford-Green, executive director of the NSAA, of insensitivity to LGBTQ youth for this decision, the story turned out to be more complicated: in 2013, she introduced a non-discrimination policy at NSAA to include transgender students. Her proposal created controversy, and the NSAA board decided to avoid taking a stand and to defer to local school districts. That experience influenced Blanford-Green’s decision to tell Barth to avoid material for his television appearance that addressed topics in sexuality:

“I don’t want the speech platform to be seen as pushing an individualized agenda. If we have the opportunity to promote speech in a positive light that doesn’t create controversy or debate about students, content, the activity of the NSAA -- that drove my decision.”¹²⁴

Barth reacted to the NET controversy with surprise. “To be honest, it kind of hurt, [because] it felt like they [meaning NSAA] were trying to shut down a certain demographic of people from the speech community entirely.”¹²⁵

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Joe Dejka, “Speech champ wins fight over project on gender identity,” *Omaha.com*, April 4, 2014, accessed April 9, 2014 at <http://www.omaha.com/article/20140402/NEWS/140409670>.

¹²⁴ Margaret Reist, “NSAA reverses course on gender-identity poems,” *JournalStar.com*, April 2, 2014, accessed April 9, 2014 at http://journalstar.com/news/local/nsaa-reverses-course-on-gender-identity-poems/article_ce6aa722-6391-5357-8dd0-08c23ca5b502.html.

¹²⁵ “High School Speech Champion Discusses NSAA's Temporary Block On Poem,” *NETNebraska.org*, April 2, 2014, accessed April 9, 2014 at <http://www.netnebraska.org/article/news/high-school-speech-champion-discusses-nsaas-temporary-block-poem>.

He explained his choice of material by placing it in the context of his experience as a student who did not conform to conventional gender norms: "I'm a very effeminate man, and I've gone through so much pain and intolerance because of that," Barth said. "The message of 'Swingset' is very close to my heart because it speaks out against that."¹²⁶ Barth said he never intended his poems to promote an agenda on gay or transgender issues. He said they send a message about acceptance. "I knew I had to do a poetry program on something that mattered."¹²⁷

Barth's supporters created a Facebook page with over 1,100 members, and a petition calling for the NSAA to reverse its demand garnered over 400 signatures. Others expressed their support for Barth via Twitter under the hash tag #LetMichaelSpeak. The groundswell encouraged Barth to stand his ground on freedom of expression.

Some high school speech coaches whose districts were sending winners to appear on "Best of the Best" considered asking their students to boycott the taping session unless NSAA reversed its stance. Bridgeport speech coach Glen Lussetto said he judged Barth's speech twice and agreed it promoted acceptance, not an agenda -- and he was not offended. "And I'm about as conservative as they come in this speech community," he said.¹²⁸

In the face of mounting support for Barth, the NSAA unexpectedly reversed its decision and said it would support Barth's decision to perform the material.

Even before the NSAA's reversal, NET General Manager Mark Leonard had decided that the public television network would broadcast whatever poems Barth chose. "It's an expression of poetry, a free expression, and these are values that public media supports," Leonard said. "In terms of the nature of a competition like this, as well as poetry, I think it's expressing a student's personal point of view and, for me, that's valid."¹²⁹

Exposures and Coverups: School Struggle with Double Standards, Privacy, and Porn

School administrators can also, at times, become ensnared in policing 'obscenity' beyond the textbook or classroom, and the 2013-14 school year demonstrated that this role can result in unwelcome interference in students' private lives. In **Florida** some local school district administrators, upon learning of a student's employment in gay adult porn, immediately reacted with—then had to retract—a suspension; local school administrators in conservative **Utah** treated female students' cleavage, bare shoulders, and tattoos like obscenity, revealing nothing more than a double-standard.

At Cocoa High School in Brevard County, **Florida**, controversy erupted when school officials suspended an eighteen-year old male student upon learning that he was employed as a performer for a sexually explicit gay media company. After protests over the suspension from other students and community representatives in the central Florida school district, administrators rescinded it.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Reist, "NSAA reverses course..."

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ "High School Speech Champion Discusses..."

Parent Melyssa Lieb found herself battling those administrators who moved unilaterally to issue the ten-day suspension to her son Robert Marucci, who appeared as “Noel” in five sexually explicit videos available at the adult website SeanCody.com between October and December 2013. The suspension would have led to an automatic failure for the academic year. Peers attending Cocoa High discovered Marucci’s condomless “bareback” sex videos on the Internet and, according to a *Miami Herald* reporter, “bullied him after the discovery.”¹³⁰

Early word of the controversy surfaced on the social media site Reddit, when someone who knew of Marucci through a mutual acquaintance posted the following:

“My cousin is a schoolmate with the model who plays Noel. Apparently this last week word got out around the school that he was in gay porn. He got severely bullied and, instead of helping him, the school will not let him graduate due to him causing a ‘campus disturbance.’ They suspended him for 10 days, which leads to an automatic FA (failure from absences).

Several students planned to protest by wearing support shirts, making posters, and skipping a class. The principle [sic] is threatening to automatically expel any student who joins in.

I am still very closeted, and it hurts to hear friends and family think this guy is a sick and disturbed person by being in gay porn.”¹³¹

Supporters noted that as a legal adult, Marucci was free to make his own decisions about his employment and that none of his activities involved the school. Marucci’s mother came to his defense, noting that her son was motivated by a desire to help support her financially: “I think he’s the most awesome person in the world,” she said. “He stood up and he was the man of the house when I couldn’t be.”¹³²

After Cocoa High reversed its decision and allowed Marucci to resume classes, school district spokesperson Michelle Irwin defended the district’s process for investigating the student’s activities: “No child would ever be suspended for a job that they have outside of the school environment... In this particular case, we had an investigation, which is now complete, and the

¹³⁰ Steve Rothaus, “Central Florida student, 18, kicked out of high school after peers discover he starred in bareback sex film,” Gay South Florida Blog, *MiamiHerald.com*, undated post, accessed February 5, 2014 at <http://miamiherald.typepad.com/gaysouthflorida/2014/01/central-florida-student-18-kicked-out-of-high-school-after-peers-discover-he-starred-in-bareback-sex-film.html>.

¹³¹ “School Backtracks After Suspending Student Robert Marucci For Starring In Sean Cody Gay Porn Video,” *Huffington Post (UK)*, January 22, 2014, accessed February 5, 2014 at http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/01/22/us-student-suspended-sean-cody-gay-porn-video_n_4642576.html?utm_hp_ref=uk.

¹³² “UPDATE: Florida Teen Expelled For Performing In Porn Allowed Back To School,” *Tampa.CBSlocal.com*, January 21, 2014, accessed February 5, 2014, at <http://tampa.cbslocal.com/2014/01/21/florida-teen-expelled-for-performing-in-porn-allowed-back-to-school/>.

student is welcomed to come back to talk to [Principal Stephanie Soliven] about his educational options,” said Irwin.¹³³

Asked whether the student had violated Florida obscenity laws, Assistant State Attorney Wayne Holmes said, “We’re basically in a society today where consenting adults can do what consenting adults want to do...What 30, 40, or 50 years ago may have been a crime, you can now go to a local movie theater and see.”¹³⁴

Society today also offers new digital techniques for manipulating appearances. Female students at Wasatch High School in Heber City, **Utah**—an hour’s drive from Salt Lake City—alleged that administrators ordered their yearbook portraits photo-edited to cover cleavage, bare shoulders, and tattoos to accord with the school dress code without the students’ knowledge or permission.

Wasatch’s school policy states that clothing must be “modest, neat, clean and in good repair” and defines modesty as “covering shoulders, midriff, back, underwear and cleavage at all times,” though students note that sleeveless tops are rarely reprimanded. The dress code also allows students to have tattoos as long as they are not “conspicuous, extreme or odd.” Students noted that they were not reprimanded for wearing any of the outfits that were edited for the yearbook.¹³⁵

Students became very vocal about feeling personally shamed due to the administration’s inconsistency with policy. While some individual young women’s yearbook photos were edited, photos of other young women wearing the same tops and revealing the same body parts were not. Most notably, not a single male student was edited for exposing skin.

One parent approached for a statement noted that her child had shown her a yearbook page from the previous year entitled “Wasatch Stud Life: Studs doin’ [sic] what studs do best!” in which male students were celebrated for baring their chests, tattoos, and underwear.¹³⁶

Utah has long been known for its large religious communities and their stated commitment to stringent moral principles, but critics of the school’s unequal yearbook photo standards for males and females argued that the issue went far beyond simple dress code. Holly Mullen, executive director of the Rape Recovery Center in Salt Lake City, called for a district investigation into

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Stacey Barchenger, “After porn-movie controversy, Cocoa High senior ready to return to school,” *FloridaToday.com*, January 22, 2014, accessed February 5, 2014 at http://www.floridatoday.com/article/20140122/NEWS01/301220020/After-porn-movie-controversy-Cocoa-High-senior-ready-return-school?nclick_check=1.

¹³⁵ Kristen Moulton, “Utah school defends yearbook editing for modesty,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 29, 2014, accessed June 17, 2014 at <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/58002926-78/dress-students-code-font.html.csp>.

¹³⁶ Erin Alberty and Kristen Moulton, “Girls’ yearbook photos edited; boys bared skin, underwear, tattoos” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, May 30, 2014, accessed June 17, 2014 at <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/58007750-78/yearbook-dress-girls-code.html.csp>.

school policy on such standards, which she believed to be “an example of a culture that shames girls and women” for dressing in a way that “encourage[es] men to rape them through their reckless behavior.”¹³⁷

Sophomore Kimberly Montoya, who had sleeves edited onto her yearbook photo, told a reporter that the pictures merely represented the way the school aimed to “humiliate” young women who broke the dress code. She told of being reprimanded for wearing what the reporter described as an “immodest skirt” and being ordered to wear a pair of sweatpants with the words “I support Wasatch High dress code” written on them as punishment so that, “People know you got dress-coded, that something about you was immodest. They look at you like, ‘You done wrong.’”¹³⁸

District Superintendent Terry Shoemaker issued a statement explaining that students had been warned that, if outfits did not comply with dress code standards, photos would be edited accordingly. Many students and parents denied receiving any such warning. While acknowledging that, “Wasatch High School and Wasatch County School District are evaluating the practice of photo editing of pictures as it now stands and will make a determination on further use of the practice,” Shoemaker said little to address the gender double standard. He only apologized “that we could have done a better job in enforcing [the dress code] consistently.”¹³⁹

In an opinion piece for the *Salt Lake Tribune*, a former speech-language pathologist for the Wasatch County School District related her own discomfort regarding the shaming of girls for their clothing choices. She indicated that the administration had been making strides in the past few years to address local concerns, yet still had further to go:

“They [recently] instituted an anti-bullying campaign. Now, the final frontier is to understand that reprimanding girls who are wearing clothing considered appropriate attire in most of the country or making them march around in special sweat suits is bullying.”¹⁴⁰

Frauds Defrocked: Students & Parents Push Back Against Phony Sex Ed ‘Experts’

Schools frequently invite guest speakers to present to youth about sexual health, sometimes because of their own teachers’ inexperience or discomfort with teaching about sexuality, but not

¹³⁷ Michael Martinez, “Utah high school's yearbook photo editing angers female students,” *CNN.com*, May 29, 2014, accessed June 17, 2014 at <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/29/us/utah-high-school-yearbook-photos-editing>.

¹³⁸ Erin Alberty, “Students say altered yearbook photos meant to shame them,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 28, 2014, accessed June 17, 2014 at <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/58000870-78/baum-photos-montoya-yearbook.html.csp>.

¹³⁹ Benjamin Wood, “Wasatch School District defends decision to edit yearbook photos,” *Deseret News*, May 29, 2014, accessed June 17, 2014 at <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865604111/Wasatch-School-District-defends-decision-to-edit-yearbook-photos.html?pg=all>.

¹⁴⁰ “More skin in the game. Bare shoulders in Utah continue to draw attention...” *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 9, 2014, accessed June 17, 2014 at <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/blogsdebate/58046947-176/yearbook-sltrib-com-http.html.csp>.

all of these external ‘experts’ prove capable of meeting the most basic standards for medical accuracy and inclusiveness toward all students. In the 2013-14 school year, students and parents in **Missouri** and **North Carolina** protested speakers’ shame-based lectures disseminating alarming misinformation and judgment about sex outside of marriage, sexual orientations other than heterosexuality, and other sexual health topics. In **Minnesota**, the content of a retired priest’s sex education lessons was not at issue—but the content of his character certainly was. Two of these incidents reflected broader controversies in the Roman Catholic Church over the doctrine on homosexuality and cover-ups of sexual abuse of children by priests.

Back in the 2011-2012 school year, **Missouri**’s Camdenton R-III School District, with over 4,000 students enrolled in a community midway between Kansas City and St. Louis, had gone to court over allegations that its schools blocked student access to Internet sites with information about LGBTQ topics. The district settled by agreeing to unblock the sites and pay the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) \$125,000 to cover a portion of their attorney fees.¹⁴¹ Just two years later, the district’s sponsorship of motivational speaker Tina Marie Griffin landed Camdenton back in the news for 2013-14, triggering a month of community-level recriminations.

Griffin, [who claims to have first-hand experience in the entertainment industry](#) through “working” on programs such as *Jimmy Kimmel Live* and *Melrose Place* – but whose name is listed nowhere in the authoritative Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com) of television and film actors and technicians – crusades across America “to reveal the deadly consequences of the glamorization of premarital sex, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, cutting and other self-destructive behaviors portrayed in all entertainment mediums.”^{142,143} She had been accused in the past of fomenting fear and shame through speaking engagements that frame adolescence as a minefield of perpetual danger: the father of a student who attended a 2005 assembly in Montana alleged that Griffin said “that condoms cause cancer, that birth control pills are only 20 percent effective, that sexually transmitted diseases are spread by skin to skin contact, that third trimester fetuses can be aborted, that video games lead to homicide, that human papilloma virus can be transferred through condoms and that teens can achieve ‘second virginity’ through abstinence.”¹⁴⁴

The school district invited Griffin to address middle and high school students in January 2014 after district personnel saw her speak at a Missouri School Counselors conference.

Several Camdenton parents expressed concern that Griffin’s talk would inspire fear more than responsibility among teens. Kim Garrison, a mother of three students enrolled in Camdenton

¹⁴¹ Deanna Wheeler, “ACLU suits ends, Camdenton School Districts pays \$125,000,” *LakeNewsOnline.com*, March 29, 2012, accessed March 5, 2014 at <http://www.lakenewsonline.com/article/20120329/NEWS/303299819#>.

¹⁴² Spree Hilliard, “School board vets guest speaker policy,” *LakeNewsOnline.com*, February 5, 2014, accessed March 5, 2014 at <http://www.lakenewsonline.com/article/20140225/News/140229160>.

¹⁴³ Tina Marie Griffin official website, accessed March 12, 2014 at <http://tinamarielive.com/wordpress/>.

¹⁴⁴ Hilliard, “School board vets...”

schools, said “my kids came home in a frenzy... They were very upset... [Griffin] was also selling purity rings after the assembly.”¹⁴⁵ In contrast, junior Jordan Major who attended the event told the local *Lake Sun* news “I loved it.” For this student, Griffin’s message was simply “about taking negativity in your life and replacing it with the positive.”¹⁴⁶

An audio recording of the assembly circulated soon after the controversy surfaced. The recording did not contain evidence of the most incendiary statement attributed to Griffin in the Montana assembly. According to the local news source *LakeExpo.com*, “As for the allegation that Griffin told students they would regain their virginity after wearing a purity ring for two weeks, the recording of the high school presentation contained no such language.”¹⁴⁷

Griffin insisted that parent complaints about her remarks were founded on hearsay, and complained that school district administrators had failed to defend her in the weeks after the controversy emerged: “I know what I can and can’t say in schools, my agenda was to save lives and that is what I did.”¹⁴⁸ It seems unlikely that the district will court further publicity by extending another invitation to the divisive speaker in the new school year.

Charlotte Catholic High School in **North Carolina** was the scene of another speaker controversy following a March 2014 address by Sister Jane Dominic Laurel, a nun of the Dominican order, who angered some students and parents with her remarks about sexual orientation, divorce, and single parenting. Sister Jane took an unplanned sabbatical in the wake of parent protests over her polarizing and medically inaccurate presentation.

The nun told a student assembly that children raised by single parents had a greater chance of becoming gay or lesbian than children raised by a married heterosexual couple. Her talk, billed as “Masculinity and Femininity: Difference and Gift,” upset many students and parents. Although there is no video or audio recording of Sister Jane’s remarks, students reported that she said studies exist to prove that gays and lesbians are not born with same-sex attractions and that correlations exist between masturbation and homosexuality.

An online petition with over 3,000 names condemned Sister Jane’s appearance, while the nun’s supporters responded with their own petition in favor of her viewpoint, which they said was consistent with traditional Catholic teaching. Supporters acknowledged her intent to teach male students “that by partaking in masturbation [it] will lessen your masculinity and that through the absence of a parent in the home will also make a greater risk for homosexuality.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Spree Hilliard, “Guest speaker sparks controversy, dialog,” *LakeNewsOnline.com*, February 3, 2014, accessed March 5, 2014 at <http://www.lakenewsonline.com/article/20140203/News/140209695#>.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Nathan Bechtold, “Audio vindicates Camdenton school speaker after controversy,” *LakeExpo.com*, March 2, 2014, accessed March 5, 2014 at http://lakeexpo.com/news/lake_news/article_f24957d0-a27d-11e3-a61d-001a4bcf887a.html.

¹⁴⁸ Hilliard, “Guest speaker sparks controversy...”

¹⁴⁹ Mary Elizabeth Williams, “Controversial nun had a long history of anti-gay remarks,” *Salon.com*, April 8, 2014, accessed April 9, 2014 at

Sister Jane holds a doctorate in sacred theology from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome. Her remarks were based on a series of instructional videos, “The Rich Gift of Love,” she created for Aquinas College in Nashville, Tennessee, where she is an associate professor. *Salon.com*, staff writer Mary Elizabeth Williams wrote that Sister Jane’s video lecture “asserts as ‘true’ that ‘Oral sex is not part of the natural love between a man and a woman. It was actually imported by the homosexual culture.’”

Williams continued,

“If you, as a conservative Catholic educator, want to peddle a narrow and traditional view of the roles of men and women and say that’s how God wants you to roll, that’s bad enough. If however you’re telling teenagers flat out nonsense, pushing a fictitious view that, for instance, gay people are gay because they were damaged in childhood, you do not deserve to call yourself an educator. ... This isn’t about morality or opinion or advice; it’s about straight up intellectual dishonesty.”¹⁵⁰

Soon after Sister Jane’s presentation, nearly 900 people attended a Charlotte Catholic High ‘town hall’ to express their concerns. Some parents expressed support for Father Matthew Kauth, the school’s chaplain who invited Sister Jane, but many others were highly critical. While some critics were angry about the divisive details of Sister Jane’s message, others were simply upset that Chaplain Kauth had scheduled a student assembly on the topic of sexuality without giving parents prior notification.

A parent who said she was representing LGBTQ students who attend Charlotte Catholic said that Sister Jane “pounded home the message” that if these students are questioning their sexual identity, they had better stay in the closet.¹⁵¹ She said that the effect of the student assembly had been to create an unsafe environment for the school’s LGBTQ students and their allies.

Father Roger Arnsparger, diocesan vicar of education, justified Sister Jane’s appearance, saying she had “been invited to give this presentation very many times throughout the country in many dioceses and with great interest and success.” However, he claimed a “misunderstanding about the content of the last part of the presentation,” attributing the problem to presenting one-sided data in an “ongoing debate” amongst scholars on the nature of human sexuality.¹⁵² Father Kauth apologized to parents for the lack of notification and content, but defended Sister Jane’s presentation on same-sex attraction as consistent with Church teaching. He joined Father Arnsparger in cautioning about the social science data she quoted on homosexuality.

Parent arguments continued into the school’s parking lot after the end of the two-hour forum and even reverberated in Charlotte’s local Catholic congregations the following Sunday. At St. Ann Catholic Church, Rev. Timothy Reid told parishioners some parents and students had committed

http://www.salon.com/2014/04/08/controversial_nun_had_a_long_history_of_anti_gay_remarks/#.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

sins by protesting Sister Jane's speech with an "utter lack of charity and vicious disrespect . . . in this fight."¹⁵³ Reid also addressed sexual orientation, telling his congregation that those "who suffer from same-sex attraction" must be treated with respect, compassion and sensitivity; and that because the Church teaches that homosexual acts are always wrong, gays and lesbians are called to lives of chastity.

The Charlotte Catholic High School controversy, he said, "has revealed that a large number of . . . our students and parents either do not know the Church's teaching on homosexuality or, worse yet, they reject it outright -- even misusing papal comments to do so."¹⁵⁴ The comments by church authorities as contrasted with the concerns of parents reflect the broader conflict in the Roman Catholic Church over doctrine on sexual orientation. With the ascension of Pope Francis and his more accepting remarks about homosexuality, many LGBTQ Catholics and allies are starting to hope for improvement in the Church's official position.¹⁵⁵

Sister Jane canceled all of her subsequent speaking engagements and decided to take a sabbatical from her teaching post at Aquinas College. College President Sister Mary Sarah defended the nun, insisting that Sister Jane "spoke clearly on matters of faith and morals," and called her qualified to do so as a theologian trained at a Pontifical University. But, the president conceded, Sister Jane's "deviation into realms of sociology and anthropology was beyond the scope of her expertise. . . There are no words that are able to reverse the harm that has been caused by these comments."¹⁵⁶

In Wright County, **Minnesota**, the Roman Catholic Church found itself embroiled in another controversy after Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) broadcast an investigative story about charges of child sexual abuse by a retired Catholic priest. Listeners reacted with alarm to the allegations against Harry Wash, who previously led the congregation of St. Henry's church in Monticello, and at the time of the broadcast worked on the county payroll as a sexual health educator.

The controversy began when MPR broadcast a story that it had obtained Church documents revealing decades-old charges of sexual abuse levied against Walsh on behalf of a 15-year old Detroit girl and 12-year old South St. Paul altar boy. The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis took part in a 1996 financial settlement for the girl, but ignored the case affecting the boy, and continued to allow Walsh to work in parishes until he retired in 2011 at age 77.

¹⁵³ Tim Funk, "Priest says sins were committed in Charlotte Catholic High School 'fight'," *CharlotteObserver.com*, April 8, 2014, accessed April 9, 2014 at <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2014/04/08/4826902/priest-says-sins-were-committed.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Amy Cowman, "Nun's message to students on gays prompts parents' ire," *USA Today*, April 3, 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/04/03/catholic-nun-homosexuality-speech/7250825/>.

¹⁵⁶ Tim Funk, "Nun at center of Charlotte Catholic High controversy goes on leave," *CharlotteObserver.com*, April 8, 2014, accessed April 9, 2014 at <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2014/04/07/4825299/nun-at-center-of-charlotte-catholic.html#.U0NKfMd-cXc>.

Walsh, who had been a priest since 1960, took a leave of absence from the Church in the early 1990s to study sexology at the Institute for the Advanced Study of Sexual Health in San Francisco. In 1997, he contributed to the book *How I Got into Sex: Leading Researchers, Sex Therapists, Educators, Prostitutes, Sex Toy Designers, Sex Surrogates, Transsexuals, Criminologists, Clergy, and More....* By the late 1990s, in addition to his work as a priest, he was serving as a part-time community educator for the Wright County Public Health Department.

Walsh denied the charges of sexual contact with the girl when the allegations were first made in the 1990s, and suggested that the Sexual Revolution was to blame for any misunderstanding: “It could have happened...because it was the ‘60s, and we’d gather for meetings, there were hugs and kisses all around. It sure certainly wasn’t a sexual thing. So there could’ve been an affectionate kiss that got (mis) translated.”¹⁵⁷

In the words of the local news source *St.MichaelPatch.com*, Walsh’s 2011 retirement from the priesthood was demanded by the Archdiocese not because of sexual conduct with children but rather his sexual involvement with another adult: “Reports show, thanks to evidence collected by MPR, that Walsh had an affair with a parishioner, a married, then eventually, [sic] divorced woman.”¹⁵⁸

Wright County Public Health Director Carol Schefers confirmed that Walsh had signed a two-year contract in 2013 with the county to provide, in a description from public records obtained by MPR, “medically accurate sexuality education, pregnancy prevention and STI prevention to high risk youth or adults.”¹⁵⁹

The Minnesota chapter of Survivors’ Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP) issued a statement in response to the growing controversy. “We call on county officials to immediately fire him...and aggressively reach out to anyone he may have hurt while on the payroll of taxpayers.”¹⁶⁰

Within a few days of the MPR story and SNAP’s expression of concern, the county acted to suspend Walsh’s work; its Human Services Board voted unanimously to cancel his employment contract. Wright County Commissioner Charles Borrell insisted that the county was not judging

¹⁵⁷ Madeleine Baran, “Abuse claims kept secret allowed priest to minister and teach sex ed,” *Minnesota Public Radio News*, December 19, 2013, accessed January 27, 2014 at <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/collections/catholic-church/2013/12/19/abuse-claims-kept-secret-allowed-priest-to-minister-and-teach-sex-ed/>.

¹⁵⁸ Mike Schoemer, “Report: Monticello Priest Accused of Misconduct Teaches Sex Education to Wright County Teens,” *St.MichaelPatch.com*, December 20, 2013, accessed January 27, 2014 at <http://stmichael.patch.com/groups/police-and-fire/p/report-monticello-priest-accused-of-misconduct-teaches-sex-education-to-wright-county-teens>.

¹⁵⁹ Baran, “Abuse claims kept secret...”

¹⁶⁰ Press release, “MN - Predator priest now teaches sex ed; SNAP responds,” Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, December 19, 2013, accessed January 27, 2014 at http://www.snapnetwork.org/mn_predator_priest_now_teaches_sex_ed_snap_responds.

Walsh’s guilt or innocence, but rather “one of our large school districts – Monticello - said they didn’t want him working with their district, so that makes it pretty hard to do the job.”¹⁶¹

The Minnesota Catholic Defense League also weighed in on the story, accusing MPR of bad faith in reporting and suggesting that the radio station’s motives were not to protect youth but rather to generate listener ratings: “We find it disturbing and completely hypocritical for MPR to criticize the Church for withholding information when, in fact, they appear to be holding back information to benefit their editorial schedule.”¹⁶²

As shown by two these Church-driven controversies, sexuality education is never simply about what happens in the public school K-12 health classroom. The 2013-14 school year stood out for illustrating the need to monitor all the teachable moments that shape how young people learn about their sexuality.

Conclusion: 50 & Fit – Fighting for a Sexually Healthy America

Over the past half-century SIECUS has been the premier target of the Religious Right and other extreme conservative organizations mentioned throughout this report. In 1968, Rev. Billy James Hargis’ Christian Crusade attacked SIECUS in its pamphlet, *Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Sex?*, with estimated sales of 250,000 copies. In the 1960s, the once-powerful John Birch Society, implicated recently by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) as a force in the current anti-Common Core movement, frequently framed sexuality education as a ‘filthy Communist plot.’ In 1995, Focus on the Family published the attack document *SIECUS: You Won’t Believe What They Want to Teach Your Kids*, followed the next year by a Concerned Women for America campaign against SIECUS for promoting “promiscuity” (leading to 30,000 pieces of hate mail arriving at SIECUS headquarters).¹⁶³

Now, just as then, these attacks on sexuality education and the organizations and individuals who provide it are intended to intimidate advocates for honest, inclusive sexuality education, but they also serve as reminders of the importance of this work wherever teaching and learning occur: in public, private, and parochial schools, in community centers, in healthcare facilities, in religious congregations, and in our homes.

In the 2013-14 school year and beyond, advocates for comprehensive sexuality education must stay alert to the specter of intertwined agendas on the Right: Religious Right groups warn that Common Core State Standards (which only cover math and English) will promote anti-Christian values and homosexuality. Far-Right conspiracist groups like the John Birch Society view the Common Core as another attempt to impose a ‘New World Order.’ And secular pro-privatization activists such as the Koch brothers—who use their wealth as members of America’s second

¹⁶¹ Mary Lynn Smith, “Ex-priest suspended from sex education work for Wright County,” *StarTribune.com*, December 23, 2013, accessed January 27, 2014 at <http://m.startribune.com/?id=237105661>.

¹⁶² “Catholic Defense League accuses MPR of hiding information in priest sex scandal,” *Northiowatoday.com*, December 20, 2013, accessed January 27, 2014 at <http://northiowatoday.com/2013/12/20/catholic-defense-league-accuses-mpr-of-hiding-information-in-priest-sex-scandal/comment-page-1/>.

¹⁶³ Debra W. Haffner, “Sex, Lies, and Political Extremists,” *SIECUS Report*, June/July 1996, 24(5): 2-4.

richest family to fund libertarian and conservative institutions and the Tea Party movement—take advantage of the Common Core opposition to tear at the public school system itself.

Perhaps Southern Poverty Law Center best explained how the Religious Right and other extreme conservative organizations restrict access to genuine sexuality education through their polished political alchemy: “Instead of the ‘death panels’ of ‘Obamacare,’ the fear is ‘government indoctrination camps,’” SPLC writes. “[W]ith the Common Core as a sort of unified field theory for everything the Christian Right despises about public education and with the federal government as the villain, its cause has been infused with energy from various Tea Party factions, antigovernment ‘Patriot’ groups like the John Birch Society, and other far-right extremists.”¹⁶⁴

National and state affiliates of these Far Right groups can take just one parent’s disapproval and spin it to deny access to sexual health information not just for one school but for an entire school district, or even—with the aid of zealous political allies—of an entire state, as attempted this past year in Kansas (where sexuality education policy had already fallen short of supporting minimum, essential standards). The stories behind local sexuality education battles can warn and inform community-level stakeholders in each one of the nation’s 13,000-plus school districts and can also serve to alert activists and advocates at the state and federal levels of bigger battles to come. SIECUS is committed to finding these ‘sentinel events’ in their early local stages, before they can totally define the political playing field for an entire state’s sexuality education policies.

In the 2014-15 school year, SIECUS will continue to track the nation’s anti-Common Core and Far Right bedfellows, looking out for new trends that threaten the right of all youth to receive a healthy, accurate, and positive understanding of their own sexuality.

¹⁶⁴ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Public Schools in the Crosshairs: Far-Right Propaganda and the Common Core State Standards*, May 2014, accessed August 20, 2014 at <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/publications/Public-Schools-in-the-Crosshairs-Far-Right-Propaganda-and-the-Common-Core-State-Standards>.