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# THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT AND THE POLITICS OF SEX EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

DESMOND A. D. O'DOHERTY  
YORK UNIVERSITY  
DESMONDO@MY.YORKU.CA

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In the last two decades in the United States, there has been an increase of organizations and movements that promote abstinence-only to teenagers, such as True Love Waits, founded in 1993, Silver Ring Thing, founded in 1995, and Pure Freedom, founded in 1996. In the last four decades, substantial time, energy, and resources have gone towards promoting teen abstinence until marriage. Since 1981, over a billion dollars in federal funds has been allocated to schools and organizations to implement abstinence-only-until-marriage (hereinafter referred to as abstinence-only) sex education curricula in America even though the majority of studies on abstinence-only sex education programs have concluded that they do not prevent most teenagers from participating in sexual intercourse before completing high school.<sup>1</sup>

Although it has been demonstrated that these types of programs are, for the most part, ineffective when compared to comprehensive sex education programs, and that the United States has the highest rate of unintended pregnancies, STDs, and STIs in the developed world, abstinence-only education curricula continue to be taught in schools across the country. Comprehensive sex education programs (also called “abstinence-plus”) allow for a broad discussion of sexuality, teaching that sex is a healthy part of life. It includes information on pregnancy prevention, contraception, condom

use, and yet still teaches that abstinence is the most effective way to avoid STDs (including HIV) and unintended pregnancies.<sup>2</sup> A number of these curricula (including some comprehensive sex education programs) are based on conservative values that coincide with certain sorts of Christian values, and are directly connected to the larger campaign that conservative Christian movements are undertaking against changing sexual values.<sup>3</sup> Many factors have made the Religious Right successful in influencing legislation that has provided federal funding for these programs for years.<sup>4</sup> The situation has improved with more progressive policies from the former Obama administration. However, the United States still has a long way to go in order to provide effective and accurate information to their children about sexuality. This task will not be easy as the election of Republican President Donald Trump could signal a return to the privileging of evangelical Christian beliefs and values in regards to sex education.

This paper will analyze how the Religious Right has influenced the politics inherent in the content of abstinence-only sex education curricula in the United States since the 1980s. First, it will go through a brief

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<sup>1</sup> Diane di Mauro and Carole Joffe, “The Religious Right and the Reshaping of Sexual Policy: An Examination of Reproductive Rights and Sexuality Education,” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 4, no. 1 (2007): 69.

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Calterone Williams, “Battling a ‘Sex-saturated Society’: The Abstinence Movement and the Politics of Sex Education,” *Sexualities* 14, no. 4 (2011): 418.

<sup>3</sup> Julie Jones, “Money, Sex, and the Religious Right: A Constitutional Analysis of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Sexuality Education,” *Creighton Law Review* 35, vol. 4, no. 2 (2002): 1093.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Bleakley, Michael Hennessy, and Martin Fishbein, “Public Opinion on Sex Education in US Schools,” *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 160, no. 11 (2006): 1151–56.

history of the politics and legislation behind abstinence-only sex education in the United States. Next, it will discuss how the Religious Right has been so successful in implementing these curricula in schools across the country. Then, it will show how these curricula promote a particular kind of heteronormativity based on a conservative Christian ideology, and how they have particularly affected the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community. Finally, it will briefly look at the future of sex education in the United States. For the purposes of this article, the terms “Religious Right,” “conservative Christian,” and “evangelical” will be used interchangeably and will refer to those who seek to confront the perceived decline of morality in the United States brought about by the sexual revolution, second wave feminism, and the gay and lesbian liberation movement. While it is true that religious beliefs concerning the erosion of morality are not limited to Christians, the material discussed in this article focuses specifically on Christianity.

#### *History of Abstinence-Only Sex Education in the United States*

The effectiveness of abstinence-only sex education is difficult to determine. Few reliable studies have been done on the subject, partly because the administrators of such programs themselves do not want them to be evaluated.<sup>5</sup> A recent meta-analysis of comprehensive and abstinence-only sex education has shown that comprehensive interventions are effective in delaying sexual activity, as well as decreasing STIs and unwanted pregnancies. Studies concerning abstinence-only interventions, on the other

hand, have led to very inconsistent findings.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, millions of dollars each year are still being allocated to teach these types of curricula in schools across the United States. The majority of Americans, even many conservative Christians, want comprehensive sex education to be taught in schools, yet most of the federal funding since the 1980s has gone to abstinence-only sex education programs.<sup>7</sup>

The campaign involving sex education in the United States did not really start until the 1980s. However, cultural and societal changes in the previous decade set the stage for the abstinence-only sex education campaign. The 1970s witnessed considerable societal changes that made up the framework in which the campaign for control over sex education in the United States takes place today. The sexual revolution, second wave feminism, and the gay and lesbian liberation movement all contributed to a changing social climate that put sex at the forefront of the American mind.<sup>8</sup> Many individuals in American society stopped adhering to the concept of the traditional heteronormative nuclear family and this did not sit well with certain conservative Christians. These conservative Christians started to view the United States as a “sex-saturated society” and concluded that America was undergoing a “moral decline.”<sup>9</sup> This framework provided the setting for the Religious Right to ultimately focus on the state of sexuality in the United States.

<sup>5</sup> M. Young and T. Penhollow. “The Impact of Abstinence Education: What does the Research Say?” *American Journal of Health Education* 37, no. 4 (2006): 194–202.

<sup>6</sup> Helen B. Chin et al. “The Effectiveness of Group-Based Comprehensive Risk-Reduction and Abstinence Education Interventions to Prevent or Reduce the Risk of Adolescent Pregnancy, Human Immunodeficiency Virus, and Sexually Transmitted Infections,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 42, no. 3 (2012): 272–94.

<sup>7</sup> Bleakley et al., “Public Opinion on Sex Education,” 1151.

<sup>8</sup> di Mauro and Joffee, “The Religious Right,” 79.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, “Battling a Sex-saturated Society,” 417.

Two events were particularly significant in the development of political activism of conservative Christians. The first was a child care bill introduced in 1971 to provide monetary support to families who were unable to afford child care. The bill was ultimately vetoed by Richard Nixon in response to an outpouring of letters from frightened housewives who were organized through their churches and incited into action by the Religious Right's warning that the government would take control over their children.<sup>10</sup> This success served to focus conservative Christian attention on "family" issues and it would eventually lead to the Religious Right's focus on a wider range of issues, including homosexuality and sex education. The second event was the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*, which gave women the right to have an abortion. This had a profound effect on the American consciousness, and it propelled many on both sides of the debate to become politically active.

Issues surrounding sex such as abortion, gay and lesbian rights, and sex education were some of the few issues on which Christian conservatives could agree ecumenically. In 1979, a meeting between Paul Weyrich, a conservative Republican Party operative and co-founder of the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing public policy research institute with a particularly conservative agenda, and Jerry Falwell, an Evangelical Christian and televangelist, led to the formation of the Moral Majority, which became a political and electoral force in the United States.<sup>11</sup> In her article "Fundamentalist Christians, Raunch Culture, and Post-industrial Capitalism,"<sup>12</sup> Iva Ellen Deutchman

compares the Religious Right's relationship with the Republican Party to that of a troubled marriage.<sup>13</sup> The purpose of this analogy is to highlight that the Republican Party requires the Religious Right's votes in order to win elections, and the Religious Right needs the Republican Party for the sake of influencing legislation, but it is not a perfect conjoining of values and commitments. The Religious Right consisting of Christians across denominations has helped shape the political landscape of the United States, influencing presidential elections and federal policies. Christians who are allied with the Religious Right have created many of the abstinence-only sex education curricula taught in schools across the country, which contain overt religious perspectives.

Before the late 1980s and early 1990s, sex education in American schools was not widespread.<sup>14</sup> This changed with the arrival of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, which gave rise to a more informed and thorough sex education curriculum in schools across America.<sup>15</sup> While originally seen and dismissed as a gay disease, people quickly realized that AIDS was something with which society as a whole would have to grapple. Partly because of the HIV/AIDS crisis, Americans realized that they would need to teach kids about sex in order to protect them. As a direct result, the Religious Right was no longer able to campaign for the complete removal of sex education from schools so instead it changed its target and focused on changing the subject matter of the curricula in order to better display and express its morals and ideologies, therefore creating and promoting what it considered to be a morally superior form of

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<sup>10</sup> di Mauro and Joffe, "The Religious Right," 68.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>12</sup> Iva Ellen Deutchman, "Fundamentalist Christians, Raunch Culture, and Post-industrial Capitalism," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 19, no. 1 (2008): 1–10.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> di Mauro and Joffe, "The Religious Right," 79.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine A. Lugg, "The Religious Right and Public Education: The Paranoid Politics of Homophobia," *Educational Policy* 12, no. 3 (1998): 273.

sex education, the abstinence-only-until-marriage sex education.<sup>16</sup>

The Religious Right took advantage of moral panic and cultural anger that followed the advent of AIDS. Evangelical leaders such as Jerry Falwell, Lou Sheldon, and Pat Robertson focused on the fear of AIDS as a way to raise money, strengthen their political control, and promote abstinence.<sup>17</sup> Since certain Christians believed that homosexuality is a sin, the Religious Right made use of biblically inspired apocalyptic rhetoric when discussing HIV and AIDS, for example, “God’s wrath visited upon the immoral” and “just retribution and a sign of God’s wrath for the sexual depravity produced by the sexual revolution.”<sup>18</sup> This resulted in rhetoric framing the HIV/AIDS crisis as an issue between moral and immoral, which was very beneficial to the Religious Right’s agenda. Many abstinence-only curricula still equate HIV/AIDS with homosexuality and death, and grossly exaggerate the risks of contracting the virus.<sup>19</sup> In a twisted turn of events, the HIV/AIDS epidemic was actually beneficial to the Religious Right’s agenda as it was able to capitalize on the fear and panic produced by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Since the 1980s, discussions regarding the curricula for sex education in the United States has been a passionate affair. The Religious Right who only accounts for approximately ten percent of the American population, has been much more vocal and better organized.<sup>20</sup> It has been quite successful in implementing their curricula in schools across the United States and influencing federal legislation in order to get funding for

them. The Religious Right was highly influential in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, in addition to the election and re-election of George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004.<sup>21</sup> Reagan remunerated the Religious Right voters through legislating the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) in 1981, the first source of federal funding for abstinence-only sex education in the United States.<sup>22</sup> This program has provided approximately \$10 million dollars of funds annually for abstinence-only programs from 1982 until 2009.<sup>23</sup>

In 1996, while President Bill Clinton was in office, the Religious Right was able to help pass another piece of legislation, Title V of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which provided much more funding for abstinence-only programs and was more specific in its aim. This section provided an additional \$50 million of federal funding annually for abstinence-only sex education across the country.<sup>24</sup> States who applied for this funding would have to provide three dollars for every four dollars that they received. The Heritage Foundation was involved in the writing of this legislation which is probably why the eight curricular guidelines from Title V, Section 510 (with which organizations applying for funds are required to comply) are as follows:<sup>25</sup>

- A) Abstaining from sexual activity has social, psychological, and health gains.

<sup>16</sup> di Mauro and Joffe, “The Religious Right,” 79.

<sup>17</sup> Lugg, “The Religious Right and Public Education,” 271.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 271; di Mauro and Joffe, “The Religious Right,” 79.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Rose, “Going Too Far? Sex, Sin and Social Policy,” *Social Forces* 84, no. 2 (2005), 1209.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1209; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*. Report. 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Deutchman, “Fundamentalist Christians,” 2; Edward Ashbee. “Introduction: The Bush Administration, Sex and the Moral Agenda,” in *The Bush Administration, Sex and the Moral Agenda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 8, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Ashbee, “The Bush Administration,” 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, “Battling a Sex-saturated Society,” 417.

<sup>25</sup> Sandra Vergari, “Morality Politics and Educational Policy: The Abstinence-Only Sex Education Grant,” *Educational Policy* 14, no. 2 (2000), 297.

- B) Abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage is the expected standard for all school-age children.
- C) Abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexual transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems.
- D) A mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard for human sexual activity.
- E) Sexual activity outside of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects.
- F) Childbearing out of wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents, and society.
- G) Alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances.
- H) It is important to attain self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity.

The most recent program to also provide funding for abstinence-only sex education was the Community Based Abstinence Education – Special Projects of Regional and National Significance (CBAE-SPRANS), later simply referred to as CBAE, which was enacted in 2000 by George W. Bush.<sup>26</sup> The CBAE program was established in response to the conservative apprehensions that programs funded through Title V frequently avoided Section 510 guidelines. This program supplied better direct funding to organizations with abstinence-only directives and objectives, including many different evangelical organizations such as those mentioned at the beginning of this piece. The George W. Bush administration played a significant supporting role for the abstinence-only sex education program due to the massive funding it was able to ensure the Religious Right. The

<sup>26</sup> Ashbee, "The Bush Administration," 7.

Religious Right was instrumental in the election and re-election of George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004. Kevin Phillips stated that the Republican Party under George W. Bush marked "the transformation of the GOP into the first religious party in U.S. history."<sup>27</sup> During the 1990s when George W. Bush was the Governor of Texas, he backed comprehensive sex education programs, but in 1999 he altered his position and committed himself to abstinence-only sex education programs and dismissed comprehensive sex education in order to ensure the backing of the Religious Right in early presidential primaries.<sup>28</sup> He promised, if elected, to secure an increase in federal funding for abstinence-only sex education, and once he was elected he followed through on his promise and the George W. Bush administration sought a yearly budget increase for spending on abstinence education projects.<sup>29</sup>

The CBAE program provided support and funding to public schools, youth groups, and teens across the United States through web based and live programs supporting chastity. This legislation enabled the Religious Right to effectively promote abstinence across the country and implement abstinence-only sex education programs across America. The federal government did not examine or authorize the accuracy of the information presented in abstinence-only sex education programs, meaning that the CBAE did not supervise the way in which funds were allocated and used.<sup>30</sup> So as a result, a number of conservative Christian organizations could use this government

<sup>27</sup> di Mauro and Joffe, "The Religious Right," 68.

<sup>28</sup> Ashbee, "The Bush Administration," 8–9.

<sup>29</sup> SIECUS, "A History of Federal Funding for Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs,"; Ashbee, "The Bush Administration," 9.

<sup>30</sup> Henry A. Waxman. "The Content of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs." *United States House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform - Minority Staff Special Investigations Division*, December 2004, 4.

money to promote abstinence using their distinct religious ideology.<sup>31</sup> In the first year it was instituted, the program distributed \$20 million in funds, which increased almost every year that George W. Bush was in office, to a total of \$113 million in 2007 and 2008. This federal funding was on top of the \$50 million offered by Title V and the \$13 million dollars from AFLA in those same years, while no funding was given for comprehensive sex education approaches.

George W. Bush was also in charge of appointing key conservative figures in his administration to expedite his agenda.<sup>32</sup> The heads of numerous public health organizations were replaced with conservative figures based solely on their ideological stances on issues such as abortion and sex education.<sup>33</sup> For example, Dr. Tom Coburn, former Republican Party member of the House of Representatives was appointed co-chair for the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA), Dr. Joseph McIlhaney, an opponent of condom use was appointed to the Presidential Advisory Council of HIV and AIDS, and Dr. Alma L. Golden, a pediatrician and longtime advocate of abstinence-only sex education programs was appointed as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Population Affairs (DAPSA).<sup>34</sup> The line separating religion and state was muddied to an unprecedented degree during his presidency. Organizations identified as being in opposition with the Religious Right's agenda faced the possibility of having their funding taken away. As a result, information on websites of public health organizations such as National Cancer Institute (NCI) and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) were adjusted and trimmed to display abstinence-only ideologies.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Ashbee, "The Bush Administration," 7.

<sup>32</sup> di Mauro and Joffee, "The Religious Right," 69.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>34</sup> Ashbee, "The Bush Administration," 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Since the 1980s, the federal funding for abstinence-only sex education in the United States has originated from three central sources: AFLA (1981), Title V (1996), and CBAE (2000). Following their ratification, these programs have jointly contributed over one-and-a-half billion dollars in federal school funds and public and private organizations to actualize and implement the abstinence-only curricula and promote abstinence more universally.<sup>36</sup> These three pieces of legislation reflect a conservative Christian ideology, particularly Title V. Title V's Section 510 outlines eight guidelines that organizations applying for the funds need to respect, which include, for example, that "a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity," and that "sexual activity outside of marriage is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents, and society."<sup>37</sup> The Heritage Foundation was involved in the writing of the bill, which helps explain its distinct ideological message.

During Barack Obama's presidency (2008–2016) there has been a significant decrease in funding for abstinence-only curricula in the United States. He eliminated funding for the abstinence-only portion of the AFLA and CBAE as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act<sup>38</sup> of 2010, and campaigned for more comprehensive and scientifically accurate approaches to sex education.<sup>39</sup> Obama enacted the Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP), which has provided \$75 million annually for comprehensive sex education since 2010.<sup>40</sup> In 2015 while renewing the PREP program, Congress also increased funding for Title V

<sup>36</sup> SIECUS.

<sup>37</sup> Vergari, "Morality Politics," 297.

<sup>38</sup> This bill is concerned with the allocation of funds to government agencies.

<sup>39</sup> Williams, "Battling a Sex-saturated Society," 419.

<sup>40</sup> "Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP)." Advocates for Youth. Accessed January 2017.

abstinence program to \$75 million in order to match PREP funds, which has been approved for the following two years.<sup>41</sup> This means that half of federal funds allocated for sex education in the United States are still being used for potentially ineffective abstinence-only curricula in 2017. Bearing in mind the results of the 2016 presidential election, the Democratic Party no longer holds the majority of seats in the Senate meaning that any movement towards the direction of comprehensive approaches to sex education in public schools will most likely face more resistance than it would have during the Obama administration. Following the election of President Donald Trump, the Republican Party holds the majority of seats in the Senate and the House of Representatives meaning that it will encounter very little resistance when enacting legislation. Thus, it is possible that the Religious Right has a large chance of successfully campaigning the Trump administration and Republican representatives to cut federal funding to Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) as it provides support to comprehensive sex education programs across the United States.

### *Why Have Religious Conservatives Been So Successful?*

One of the reasons that the Religious Right has been so successful in implementing abstinence-only curricula in the United States is that it entails a type of politics classified by some scholars (Catherine A. Lugg (1998), Sandra Vergari (2000), Jean Calterone Williams (2011), Melvin Anchell (1986), and Diane di Mauro and Carole Joffe (2007)) as “morality politics.”<sup>42</sup> Morality politics entails the use of emotional or expressive arguments rather than factual ones to defend competing worldviews. Public schools are a perfect site

for morality politics to be employed because schools have to decide whose values should be taught and this can give rise to a polarization of public opinion. The general population may feel that policy makers are no more experts than they are because they believe that a certain sort of morality should be guiding the implemented policies, and they often have deeply personal convictions about the issue.<sup>43</sup> Many individuals have uncompromising beliefs regarding sexuality as a result of their secular or religious ideologies.<sup>44</sup> Whether the education being provided in schools is secular or religious, a particular set of ethics and moral standards are implicitly or explicitly being conveyed.<sup>45</sup> In regards to sex education, instrumental arguments focus on the most efficient way to prevent pregnancies and STIs amongst teenagers, and expressive arguments focus on the intrinsic morality of adolescent sexuality.<sup>46</sup> The Religious Right and conservative Christians regularly depends on expressive arguments that fixate on their opinion that teens should be chaste thus supporting their stance on abstinence-only sex education.<sup>47</sup>

A piece by Dr. Melvin Anchell in “Psychoanalysis Vs. Sex Education,” provides an excellent example of the type of rhetoric the Religious Right uses in order to shift towards expressive arguments rather than instrumental arguments.<sup>48</sup> In it he asserts that schools should teach the values and morals of the Christian religions. Anchell insists that what he understands as “psychoanalysis” dictates that shame, fear, and disgust are required in order for children

<sup>41</sup> Cheryl Wetzstein, “Sex-education funds to be renewed,” *The Washington Times*. April 15, 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Vergari, “Morality Politics,” 292.

<sup>43</sup> Williams, “Battling a sex-saturated Society,” 421.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 420.

<sup>45</sup> Mary Lou Rasmussen, “Secularism, Religion and ‘progressive’ Sex Education,” *Sexualities* 13, no. 6 (2010), 708–9.

<sup>46</sup> Vergari, “Morality Politics,” 293.

<sup>47</sup> di Mauro and Joffe, “The Religious Right,” 80.

<sup>48</sup> Melvin Anchell, “Psychoanalysis Vs. Sex Education,” *National Review*, June 20, 1986, 33–61.

to have a normal sexual development. He also suggests that there might be a correlation between crime rates and pre-teen “sexual indoctrination” even though there is no scientific evidence to prove that point.<sup>49</sup> Anchell uses vociferous arguments claiming that comprehensive sex education turns young people into “polymorphous perverts” or “mechanical robots” capable of taking part in any type of sex act with indifference and without guilt.<sup>50</sup> This kind of alarmist discourse is precisely what most proponents of abstinence-only education have used in order to instill fear in parents’ hearts. He asserts that youth need an educational system that affirms and upholds the Christian notion of family and defends concepts of shame, disgust, and morality as natural inborn mental dams necessary for governing sexual urges.<sup>51</sup> This type of discourse and language has been used by many proponents of abstinence-only sex education in order to provoke a sense of fear in the hearts of parents. The purpose of doing this is to create panic. Warping the standards of psychoanalytic analysis, Anchell succeeds in concentrating the attention of the general public on provocative and grotesque news reports, in order to demonstrate the decline of society as a result of comprehensive sex education. This is at the cost of dismissing and ignoring the facts determinable by case studies focused on specific issues regarding comprehensive sex education.

Anchell and other conservative Christians have used inflammatory speech in order to scare parents across the nation into advocating for abstinence-only curricula. While Anchell calls comprehensive sex education “sexual indoctrination,” others have named it “pornographic,” or a “sodomy

curriculum.”<sup>52</sup> The Religious Right increasingly saw and portrayed these curricula as well as the public schools that use them as nothing more than “bastions of state-sponsored sin.”<sup>53</sup> The Religious Right has positioned itself as a minority who is being discriminated against on the basis of its beliefs and values. Secular humanism is seen as the enemy, and by extension so too is the public school system when it attempts to implement a comprehensive approach to sex education.

Another reason for the Religious Right’s success in instituting these curricula in schools across the country has been the conflation of sex speech with sex acts. For example, stating that the discussion of sodomy is in effect the equivalent of sodomizing students, or that having a conversation about homosexuality can turn students gay. According to certain evangelicals, the simple act of talking about sex is tantamount to actually having it, and therefore teaching kids about sex in classrooms was essentially child sexual abuse.<sup>54</sup> One of the most notable illustrations of the construction of sex talks as sex acts occurred in 1994 with the termination of the U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders. Elders was known to have been outspoken on a number of topics that President Bill Clinton found controversial, such as abortion, welfare, and drug legalization. But what ultimately led to her being fired was the fact that she suggested that masturbation should be discussed in schools. Religious conservatives were outraged at the recommendation and equated it to child abuse, which is what led to her dismissal.<sup>55</sup> This incident serves as one

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 61.

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<sup>52</sup> Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 2002.

<sup>53</sup> Lugg, “The Religious Right and Public Education,” 274.

<sup>54</sup> Janice M. Irvine, “Doing It with Words: Discourse and the Sex Education Culture Wars,” *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (2000): 58.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 64.

component in a much more expansive campaign to paint advocates of comprehensive curricula as child molesters, and specifically portray gay teachers as pedophiles and sodomizers.<sup>56</sup> This rhetoric serves multiple purposes for the Religious Right's agenda: first, this rhetoric instills fear in the hearts of parents for the safety of their children. Second, it demonizes and ultimately renders homosexuality invisible, thus aiding in the suppression of the gay and lesbian liberation movements. Finally, this rhetoric silences and intimidates the opposition to abstinence-only curricula by making individuals who do not agree with it fearful of being labelled as child abusers. This rhetoric has resulted in schools engaging in forms of self-censorship when it comes to sex education because of fear of retaliation by conservative Christian forces. Self-censorship can occur through hiring organizations outside of the school to teach sex education so that if any controversy was to present itself, public attention would be directed at the organization and not the school itself. Taking into consideration the tactics employed by the Religious Right and the increasingly hostile environment concerning discussions of the method of implementation sex education curricula, many schools find it easiest to implement abstinence-only sex education curricula, thereby avoiding controversy and conflict, and obtaining access to federal funding. Thus, this rhetoric has enabled the Religious Right to promote their position and maintain their influence on sex education curricula in the United States.

In more recent years, advocates of comprehensive sex education have begun framing their arguments in terms of human rights. This change in rhetoric has helped emphasize the health dangers that abstinence-only sex education poses by keeping potentially lifesaving information from

students.<sup>57</sup> Advocates of abstinence curricula have also changed their rhetoric by using a more public health oriented language in order to bolster the credibility of their programs.<sup>58</sup> While the language they use seems scientific, these curricula teach Christian doctrine as fact and distort scientific and medical information in order to promote their own message.

### *Religious and Heteronormative Content*

Some scholars have concluded that the federal funding of abstinence-only sex education is unconstitutional taking into consideration the inherent evangelical message and ideology that is prevalent throughout many of the state funded programs and curricula.<sup>59</sup> For many years, these programs contained explicit references to Christianity, though this was later changed to subtle references to spirituality and morality.<sup>60</sup> Many of them have been demonstrated to still contain implicit conservative Christian messages concerning appropriate sexual activity, abortion, and LGBTQ issues. These curricula are also used in order to inculcate a particular notion of sexuality, based on the traditional, heteronormative family, while demonizing forms of life that do not fit this specific cultural and historical pattern.

The Waxman Report, which examined school-based sex education curricula, concluded that most of the abstinence-only sex education programs funded by CBAE that were not being coordinated by the state, consisted of numerous scientific, and medical

<sup>56</sup> Lugg, "The Religious Right," 269–70.

<sup>57</sup> di Mauro and Joffe, "The Religious Right," 70.

<sup>58</sup> Williams, "Battling a Sex-saturated Society," 419.

<sup>59</sup> Naomi Rivkind Shatz, "Unconstitutional Entanglements: The Religious Right, the Federal Government, and Abstinence Education in the Schools," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* (2008): 495–531; Jones, "Money, Sex, and the Religious Right."

<sup>60</sup> Martha E. Kempner, "A Controversial Decade: 10 Years of Tracking Debates around Sexuality Education," *SIECUS Report* 31, no. 6 (2003): 33–47.

inaccuracies.<sup>61</sup> Abstinence-only sex education programs also provided inaccurate and misleading information by merging distorted scientific facts and Christian ideologies.<sup>62</sup> For example, the language that abstinence-only programs employ to discuss fetal development clearly demonstrates the Religious Right's motive to indoctrinate children into their anti-abortion ideology. This language shifts the tone of the conversation from scientific to expressivist, relying on tropes to encourage sentimentality. This has the dramatic effect of positioning those who would support abortion rights as callous and inhuman, whereas those who are anti-abortion construct themselves as defenders of life against this threat to human worth. For example, some curricula will use the term "baby" as soon as conception happens instead of medically accurate terms such as "embryo" and "fetus" to support their pro-life ideologies. Additionally, these curricula also teach that the "baby" "snuggles" into the mother's uterus, and begins to see and hear at only 43 days. However, these descriptions have no basis in fact. In reality, the fetus only begins to see and hear during the fourth of fifth month of pregnancy.<sup>63</sup>

The curricula also use tactics of fear and shame in order to promote their evangelical abstinence-only message. In one abstinence-only video used in schools across the country, *No Second Chance*, an educator compares sex outside of marriage to playing Russian Roulette, and informs the classroom of young individuals that if they choose to have sex before marriage they should be prepared to die.<sup>64</sup> Leslie Unruh, founder and president of the National Abstinence Clearing House, uses rubber snakes to teach about different STI's and the dangers of condoms,

each one of which has a stigmatizing name such as Albert AIDS, Lucy Loss of Reputation, or Pregnant Peggy Sue.<sup>65</sup> This tactic is problematic in multiple ways: it instills a sense of shame and guilt about sex in young people, leading to their reticence to seek information and advice on sexual matters; it conflates HIV and AIDS, which are two very separate things; and it perpetuates the stereotype that women should be shamed whenever they engage in sexual activity. These scare tactics demonstrate the underlying evangelical moral agenda that is inherent in many of these programs.

The heteronormative agenda of abstinence-only curricula emerges through the eight tenets of Title V. It seems to be assumed that any relationship will lead to childbearing, and that this is expected to happen within the context of marriage. Given that only heterosexuals could marry in the United States at the time this legislation was passed, it appears that all members of the LGBTQ community are either supposed to remain celibate, or should simply not exist at all. This can have damaging effects for LGBTQ kids who are exposed to curricula that abide by these guidelines and omit information about a diversity of sexual orientations.<sup>66</sup> It can also be detrimental to any person who is not part of a heterosexual, nuclear, patriarchal family, such as kids whose parents are single, divorced, or queer, as well as people who do not want to or are unable to conceive for any number of reasons.

For the Religious Right, stereotypical gender roles are necessary in order to preserve their ideal of society. They teach traditional gender roles with women as caregivers and men as breadwinners of the household.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Waxman, "Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs."

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 21–22.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>64</sup> Rose, "Going Too Far," 1208–9.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 1209.

<sup>66</sup> C. M. Fisher, "Queer Youth Experiences with Abstinence-only-until-marriage Sexuality Education: 'I can't get married so where does that leave me?'" *Journal of LGBT Youth* 6, no. 1 (2009): 61–79.

<sup>67</sup> Rose, "Going Too Far."

While denying that humans are animals, they talk about sex in very animalistic terms. They teach the stereotype that boys are ravenous beasts that cannot control their sexual urges, while women are only interested in romance and marriage, and are the gatekeepers of sexual activity.<sup>68</sup> This can lead to dangerous consequences when it comes to issues of consent. Susan Rose, in her study on American versus Danish sex education, found that many American teens believe that a woman's clear refusal of sexual advances still appears to be ambivalent. Teaching children that women want to have sex even when they explicitly say they do not want to might be contributing to the rape culture in American society.

*Sexual Discourse: Strategic Homophobia and the Harm to the LGBTQ Community*

The Religious Right targeted the gay community in particular when they developed their rhetoric of fear and child molestation and a threat to the children of the nation during the 1980s. The increased presence and visibility of gays and lesbians and the AIDS crisis made the Religious Right construct a spectacle of fear in order to garner supporters for their cause. Lugg discusses the "paranoid politics" and "strategic homophobia" that have been used in the Religious Right's campaign for control over sex education in schools.<sup>69</sup> Lugg notes that many parents have internalized the notion that gays were trying to recruit their children into their "sexually deviant" lifestyle.<sup>70</sup> This notion has left gay teachers afraid to advocate for themselves or for comprehensive sex education for fear that they would be labelled as pedophiles or seen as trying to further their gay agenda. This spectacle of fear worked incredibly well, and many conservative parents still do not want

homosexuality to be mentioned in schools, other than to condemn it as it is considered a sin.<sup>71</sup> For example, in Pennsylvania in 1992, the Outcome-Based Education (OBE) program was proposed by the State Board of Education with the purpose of promoting educational reform, which included tolerance and teaching children the important of understanding and appreciating others.<sup>72</sup> Though the program made no mention of sexual orientation, Christian conservatives quickly made it seem as though it was not only promoting homosexuality, but also advocating that their children become gay.

This kind of rhetoric has stuck, and many conservative Christian parents internalized the notion that homosexuals are only interested in furthering their gay agenda and recruiting their children into a sexually deviant lifestyle. In addition, these parents believe that teaching their kids about homosexuality, particularly in a positive light, is an infringement on their rights to impart their own values on their children. These values, which many parents in Ian K. Macgillivray's study shared, would translate into the erasure of homosexuality from the public school system.<sup>73</sup> The parents spoke in very apocalyptic terms, saying that the "legitimization of homosexuality would lead to the breakdown of society."<sup>74</sup> According to them, normalizing and de-pathologizing other sexual orientations was giving LGBTQ individuals special rights over their own to hold religious beliefs that excluded them.

These types of curricula can have devastating effects on teens, particularly for LGBTQ youth. In her reflection on her experience in a fundamentalist educational

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 1209.

<sup>69</sup> Lugg, "The Religious Right," 268.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ian K. Macgillivray, "Religion, Sexual Orientation, and School Policy: How the Christian Right Frames Its Arguments," *Educational Studies* 43, no. 1 (2008): 29–44.

<sup>72</sup> Lugg, "The Religious Right," 276.

<sup>73</sup> Macgillivray, "Religion, Sexual Orientation, and School Policy," 36.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 37.

system, Caplice discusses how she and her queer friend felt so isolated and alone that they were both depressed and nearly suicidal.<sup>75</sup> She reminisces on “feeling trapped in the retrospective madness of a fundamentalist Christian education.”<sup>76</sup> Neither she nor her friend knew that the other was queer, for fear of complete social rejection. Though she lost her sense of spirituality, Caplice was eventually grateful for her experience, because it allowed her to truly come to terms with her sexuality and grow as an individual, which shows just how resilient many queer people can be. However, not everyone is quite as fortunate, and the risk of mental health issues, bullying, and suicide are still much higher for queer youth than they are for heterosexual youth, a statistic that is not helped by a particularly unwelcoming school environment.<sup>77</sup>

Another scholar, Christopher Michael Fisher, conducted a qualitative analysis of interviews he completed with young gay men reflecting on their experience with abstinence-only sex education.<sup>78</sup> Two of the themes he identified through his research were active silence and resiliency. Active silence denoted the deliberate exclusion and dismissal of LGBTQ discussions, which made his participants feel invisible and isolated. His discussion of resiliency highlighted the different ways that these students coped and fought back. Many of them would deliberately ask questions that would challenge the heteronormative messages the teachers were imparting, or would find other ways to obtain information about and acceptance for their sexual orientation. This shows how resilient these queer youths could

be in the face of such institutionalized hostility.

### *The Future of Sex Education in the United States*

A recently published nationally representative survey concluded that roughly eighty percent of Americans are in favor of comprehensive approaches to sex education in schools, and nearly seventy percent are in support of condom instruction.<sup>79</sup> This investigation illustrates that a plurality of American citizens are opposed to abstinence-only sex education. However, abstinence-only sex education continues to be taught at many schools across the country, supporting an ever increasing sexual illiteracy in American society.<sup>80</sup> So what is required for the United States to continue on the path towards comprehensive approaches to sex education?

One of the main reasons the Religious Right has been so successful is their ability to organize, relative to proponents of comprehensive sex education. Although it can be said that most Americans are in support of comprehensive approaches to sex education, they are also hesitant and unsure about discussing sex openly.<sup>81</sup> Additionally, those in favor of comprehensive sex education do not have powerful allies or a base of operations to campaign their curricula to be implemented into schools.<sup>82</sup> In contrast, the Religious Right have numerous strong organizations and supporters through which they can advertise their platform, and there has been a recent proliferation of movements that focus solely on promoting abstinence to teens. Enthusiasts of comprehensive sex education must begin to organize and speak out about their sentiments.

<sup>75</sup> Caplice, “School make crazy.”

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>77</sup> J. P. Elia and M. J. Eliason, “Dangerous Omissions: Abstinence-only-until-marriage School-based Sexuality Education and the Betrayal of LGBTQ youth,” *American Journal of Sexuality Education* 5, no. 1 (2010): 17–35.

<sup>78</sup> Fisher, “Queer youth Experiences.”

<sup>79</sup> Bleakley et al., “Public Opinion on Sex Education,” 1151–56.

<sup>80</sup> di Mauro and Joffe, “The Religious Right,” 82.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

Unfortunately, simply asserting their views may not be enough. For example, Sandra Vergari is concerned that material arguments will be unable to stop Religious Right members or influence change in procedures considering the morality politics muddled in the deliberation over sex education.<sup>83</sup> Multiple authors (Ellen Deutchman [2008], Lisa Isherwood [2004], and Janice Irvine [2000]) have argued that it is possible that what is needed is a cultural deviation away from the way Americans think and talk about sex. Perhaps framing the discussion in the context of a human rights perspective may help assemble more adherents of comprehensive sex education. Lisa Isherwood, speaking from an insider perspective, advocates for a new Christian theology that would change the discourse on sex to make it more positive.<sup>84</sup>

Religious conservatives have been gaining some ground in recent years. Abstinence movements such as the True Love Waits, Silver Ring Thing, and Pure Freedom have all been increasing in popularity among American teens.<sup>85</sup> These programs, which are deeply rooted in a Christian ideology, could be forming the next generation of devoted right-wing voters. Religious conservatives have also been changing their rhetoric in order to conform to society's increasing secularization. Religious and moral arguments have been augmented by conservative Christians to reflect a more contemporary concern with public health in order to garner support for abstinence-only education.<sup>86</sup> This change in tactic may make some opponents of the abstinence approach more likely to view it in a more favorable light.

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<sup>83</sup> Vergari, "Morality Politics," 2000.

<sup>84</sup> Lisa Isherwood, "Learning to Be a Woman: Feminist Theological Reflections on Sex Education in Church Schools," *Sex Education* 4, no. 3 (2004): 281–82.

<sup>85</sup> Williams, "Battling a Sex-saturated Society," 428.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 430.

Mary Lou Rasmussen takes a different approach, critiquing the perspective that secularist modes of sex education is without value. She contends that a secular, comprehensive approach to sex education is still imparting a particular set of values, even though this is rarely acknowledged.<sup>87</sup> Sex education should be more nuanced and discuss the diversity of religious orientations and contexts that can be said to help frame an individual's worldview, especially when it is in regards to something as intimate as sexuality. This may mitigate some of the Religious Rights fears that public schools are indoctrinating their children with secular humanist values with the intention of eroding their Christian beliefs. However, many of the conservative Christians will probably not be satisfied with anything other than a curriculum that is based on a particular Christian ideology.

The future of sex education in the United States is difficult to discern. Arguments found on either side of sex education debates are both mostly focused on the morality of adolescent sexuality. The Religious Right and its conservative Christian members may feel threatened by the developing sexual customs of American society. The public school system is generally regarded by the Religious Right, interested in promoting abstinence-only curricula, as their enemy. This is most recently made evident by the movement in public schools towards the acknowledgement and acceptance of LGBTQ identities. The active and powerful organization and mobilization of the Religious Right has enabled them to obtain a great deal of authority on federal legislation, local policies, and, perhaps most distressingly, presidential elections. To respond would require advocates of comprehensive sex education to raise their voices and conceivably take a more nuanced stance in

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<sup>87</sup> Rasmussen, "Secularism, Religion, Progressive Sex Education," 2010.

order to guarantee that all youth obtain the education that is required in order to make knowledgeable and healthy choices regarding their sexuality.

### *Conclusion*

For the last thirty-seven years, the Religious Right has been successful in influencing elections and legislations that have helped them obtain funding to teach abstinence-only curricula in schools across the United States. Sex education is a moral issue, and the Religious Right's rhetoric of fear has been particularly effective at convincing the general public of the alleged dangers of comprehensive programs. Most abstinence-only curricula are based on a heteronormative, conservative Christian ideology. They indoctrinate students into stereotypical gender roles stemming from a traditional, patriarchal notion of the family. The Religious Right has used HIV/AIDS and the demonization of homosexuality in order to promote their moralistic agenda.

While the future of sex education is not easily identifiable, it is possible to take a cursory glimpse into the political reality that will have a role in framing future debate. The abortion debate in the United States has remained a constant in the American consciousness since *Roe v. Wade* and can be found within both abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education curricula. Central to the abortion debate is the Mexico City policy (also referred to as the global gag rule for human rights organizations), which prevents federal funding for pro-choice non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that provide abortions, referrals, counselling, and advocate for greater abortion services. This policy has remained an area of contention between the left and the right. This policy was originally enacted in 1984 by Republican President Ronald Reagan, later rescinded by Democratic President Bill Clinton in January

1993, reinstated by Republican President George W. Bush in January 2001, subsequently rescinded by Democratic President Barack Obama in January 2009, and most recently reinstated by Republican President Donald Trump on January 23, 2017. One of the first executive orders of President Trump three days after his inauguration has been the reinstatement of the Mexico City policy blocking the allocation of federal funding to NGOs who promote and/or perform abortions.<sup>88</sup> This decision by the Trump administration should be understood as pandering to the Religious Right his by appealing to its anti-abortion beliefs with the intention of garnering support through displaying the administration's pro-life stance, and in this regard he is following suit with prior administrations who increasingly blurred the already tenuous line between church and state. Additionally, on February 1, 2017 President Trump selected evangelist Jerry Falwell Jr. to lead the Trump administration's education task force.<sup>89</sup> And on February 2, 2017, President Trump promised that his administration would overturn the Johnson Amendment that restricts political speech by churches that are tax exempt, a huge win for the Religious Right.<sup>90</sup>

While it is clear that the Democratic Party under the Obama administration had shifted towards the promotion of comprehensive approaches to sex education, the aforementioned discussion has made it evident that the legislation and policies

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<sup>88</sup> Laura Koran and James Masters, "Trump reverses abortion policy for aid to NGOs." CNN. January 24, 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Dan Merica, "Evangelical Leader Jerry Falwell Jr. to Lead Education Task Force for Trump." CNN. February 2, 2017; Cristina Marcos, "Trump Delivers for Religious Right." TheHill. February 04, 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth Landers, "Trump: I will 'destroy' Johnson amendment." CNN. February 2, 2017; Adele Stan, "Trump Leads the Religious Right to the Promised Land." BillMoyers.com. February 2, 2017.

concerning sex education are subject to revision and repeal by the majority, which is now the Republican Party. The fraught discourse concerning sex education in the United States will presumably continue to endure for many years. The amount of historical and sociological evidence suggests that abstinence-only campaign is not really concerned with the best way to help youth avoid risky sexual behaviors, but rather, is primarily concerned about whose values, morals, or ideologies should be taught in public schools. Abstinence only sex-education appears, therefore, as a way of garnering power by influencing the emotions of parents concerned about the safety of their children. Worryingly, the funds, organizational support, and vocal proponents that the Religious Right has dwarfs the resources of the comprehensive sex education advocates. The United States requires a cultural shift in order to further liberate the positive aspects of sexuality, which will only occur if those in favor of scientifically and medically-based sex education speak up and make their voices heard. Until this happens, millions of dollars of federal funds will continue to be allocated each year to schools around the country so that they can teach curricula inculcating students into a particular religious and heteronormative ideology.

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