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# THE *FAMILY LIVING* *INCLUDING SEX* *EDUCATION* CURRICULUM

ROBERT F. WAGNER, JR.\*

During the 1986-87 school year, the New York City Board of Education (the "Board") made progress on several major initiatives. These initiatives included significant reductions in class size; setting, for the first time, real standards by which to judge every school in the system; strengthening the early childhood education program; and establishing a 4.5 billion dollar capital plan. Yet no issue received as much heat and as little light, as much television coverage and as little reasoned dialogue, as the discussion of sex education in the schools. Amidst this controversy, the Board mandated a sex education curriculum, *Family Living Including Sex Education*, to help children make positive decisions affecting their sexuality.

As the New York City Board of Education considered whether there should be sex education in the schools, the one million young people in the school system were already enrolled in an "alternative" program by the mere fact of growing up in today's society. This "alternative" sex education is occurring every day outside the classroom and outside the home. It is conducted through movies, music, advertisements, magazines, and the students themselves. Today, adolescents spend approximately twenty-four hours per week watching television and another sixteen hours per week listening to the radio. By the time a New York City teenager is graduated from one of our high schools, he or she has spent more time in front of the television set than in school. Research indicates that only one out of three young people receive most of their information about family living and sexuality from the home, a religious institution, or the school.

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That means that two-thirds of our young people receive most of their information from explicit sexual messages from the media's one-sided presentation or from their peers.

This is having alarming consequences. As the Guttmacher Institute demonstrated in 1986, American teenagers become pregnant at significantly higher rates than their counterparts in five other industrialized nations. Our teenage pregnancy rate is presently so high that four out of ten of today's fourteen-year-olds will become pregnant at least once by the age of twenty. The national studies of Johns Hopkins University researchers Zelnick, Kantner and Zabin (1986) show that over half of American teenagers have had sexual intercourse. The same studies also point out that half of all teen pregnancies occur in the first six months of intercourse.

Parents, community members, religious institutions, and the schools are all concerned about the need to help young people make sense out of the information or lack of information they are receiving. The Board of Education began to realize that the teaching that was taking place in schools and homes was not powerful enough to counteract and overcome the hidden curriculum of the mass media and the young people themselves. Learning to deal responsibly with one's emerging sexuality is one of the most difficult problems that children and young people face today.

Decisions about sexuality are not solely decisions about sexual behavior. Some are about whom to be friends with, what to wear, where to go, when to say "no"—decisions about how people feel as males and females in society. Children are constantly faced with the decision of whether or not to feel good about themselves.

Students need to be enabled to make responsible decisions about their future family life, including their sexuality; decisions that reflect respect for themselves, one another, and their cultural and religious values. As the Board and Chancellor thought about the issues involved, it became increasingly clear that an appropriate program, one that dealt with the moral and ethical questions involved with family living, needed to begin not at puberty, but at the very beginning of a child's education. The New York City Board of Education has decided to offer its students such a comprehensive program in a *Family Living Including Sex Education* curriculum. The Board of Education is fully aware of the huge and awesome nature of the undertaking. *Family Living Including Sex Education* is a highly charged, emotional topic dealing with personal, political, religious, cultural, moral, and ethical issues. The issues raised appear threatening, particularly to those who are not really sure of what is being done, of what the curriculum is all about. However, in the view of the Board, there is no choice. It is necessary to deal with the profound issues posed by teenage pregnancy, by the breakdown of the family, by the erosion of moral values. The Board of Education must take on, and take on

directly, the need for sex education in the context of family living, even with the knowledge that the issues involved generate controversy and misunderstanding—some of it deliberate.

Moreover, there is a growing awareness that the Board of Education has little choice. Polls show that public opinion strongly supports sex education in public schools. Eighty-eight percent of New Yorkers in every part of the state support sex education (Penn and Schoen Poll, 1985). In terms of specific religious groups, eighty-nine percent of Catholics support sex education in public schools and eighty-four percent of Protestants feel the same way (Harris Poll, 1985). It is crucial for the general public to have an overview of what the New York City Board of Education is doing as it attempts to live up to its responsibility for helping young people to lead healthy and fulfilling lives.

### THE HISTORY

The Board of Education began implementing the *Family Living Including Sex Education* curriculum in the New York City schools when the first edition was published in 1967. The present program has had a long history, including dialogue with those who share in responsibility for this endeavor—parents, community members, educators and religious institutions.

The first curriculum was essentially the same as the present one. The goal of *Family Living Including Sex Education* is to help young people make effective decisions based on correct knowledge, self-esteem, awareness of their own values, appreciation of their family, cultural, and religious background, and respect for democratic principles. The program focused on four major themes: family living, personal growth, communication and interpersonal relationships, and human sexuality.

In 1975, New York City faced the worst fiscal crisis in its history. Massive budget cuts were imposed on all city agencies including the schools. The *Family Living Including Sex Education* program was one of the first to lose funding. Many dedicated teachers continued teaching this subject on their own but without administrative support for funding and materials. By 1977, *Family Living Including Sex Education* had all but disappeared from the classroom.

At this time, however, the increasing number of unintended and sometimes intended teen pregnancies had begun to make everyone concerned. It became evident that there was a pressing need to develop young people's personal and social competence in order to lead them to choices which would be best for them and their families. When the curriculum first came out in 1967, over 19,000 teen pregnancies were reported in New York City. By 1977, that figure had more than doubled.

By the late 1970's, requests from parent groups led Board of Educa-

tion officials to propose updating and reintroducing the curriculum. The first step toward restoring the program was to create a city-wide Advisory Committee, from a broad range of community, educational, and religious groups, to develop an updated curriculum. These groups included parents, physicians, clergy, and health professionals. The creation of such an advisory group is an unusual procedure for the Board of Education in terms of developing curriculum. This approach, however, was taken by the Division of Curriculum and Instruction because of the special nature of this curriculum, which not only needed an educational thrust but also had to complement and supplement what is taught in the home and by religious institutions. All groups had to be represented to ensure that the content and design of the curriculum reflected the needs of a diverse urban population.

By 1984, the Advisory Committee had worked together for seven years, providing guidance and advice on curriculum content. Fortunately, New York City's Mayor, Ed Koch, believed in this program and acted upon it. With special funding from the Mayor's Office, the 1984-85 school year saw the beginning of a concerted effort on the part of the New York City Board of Education to develop and implement a comprehensive *Family Living Including Sex Education* curriculum in the public schools. The revised and updated curriculum was almost ready. Before funding was received in 1984, pilot programs and parent workshops were being conducted in six districts and ten high schools.

The 1984 curriculum was endorsed by the Board of Education, but not mandated. Nevertheless, the vast majority of parents with children in the public schools have been enthusiastically in favor of the curriculum. Thousands of parents have been part of special workshops and meetings that are an integral part of the program. The United Parents Association and hundreds of religious and community groups have endorsed the program. In fact, one of the first districts to mandate the *Family Living Including Sex Education* curriculum was on Staten Island, a community perceived by some to espouse more traditional and conservative values.

In addition to the development of a broad policy, the Board of Education took steps to ensure effective implementation of this policy. District and School Advisory Councils were created. In order to ensure high quality teaching of the curriculum, six highly qualified coordinators were hired to work out of the Office of Health, Physical Education and School Sports of the Division of Curriculum and Instruction to oversee program implementation in the districts and high schools. Approximately 3,000 elementary and junior high school teachers and 600 health education teachers took a thirty-hour staff training program, and thousands of parents participated in a variety of programs and workshops.

By June 1986, twenty-one out of thirty-two school districts were voluntarily implementing *Family Living Including Sex Education* with

eighty percent of the high schools following suit. District and School Advisory Councils were also in place. By all accounts, the program had been well received where it had been implemented. But its implementation had not been universal, and new, truly alarming information on AIDS had become public; thus the importance of sex education became even more urgent than it had been in the past. As a result, the Board of Education decided last October to mandate *Family Living Including Sex Education* in all thirty-two districts and all high schools. Despite the mandate, the Board continued the policy of allowing parents to keep their children out of the program, and the practice of giving substantial scope to School and District Advisory Councils. The Chancellor's funding for next year is an appropriation of 2.8 million dollars for the implementation of *Family Living Including Sex Education* and the *Growing Healthy* curriculum (a comprehensive health education program for grades kindergarten through six). The full implementation is expected to take place over a two-year period.

#### CURRICULUM

The present *Family Living Including Sex Education* program helps young people make effective decisions based on correct knowledge, good self-esteem, awareness of their own values, appreciation of their family, cultural and religious background, and respect for domestic principles. The program focuses on four major themes: family living, personal growth, communication and interpersonal relationships, and human sexuality.

Specifically, the goals of the program are to assist students in:

- (a) understanding that love, responsibility, and mutual concern are basic to harmonious family life;
- (b) recognizing the values and responsibilities involved in marriage and parenthood;
- (c) developing a code of values that will enhance self-esteem and serve as a guide for reasoned judgments and responsible behavior;
- (d) building communication skills which can be applied in expressing emotion, resolving conflict, and seeking guidance in the home, the school, and with peers;
- (e) forming a wholesome attitude toward sexuality as an integral part of one's total being;
- (f) recognizing sexual stereotyping and its consequences;
- (g) understanding that adolescent sexual intimacy has many inherent problems;
- (h) acquiring a body of clear facts and knowledge related to human growth, development and reproduction.

From the time the curriculum was first introduced in the late 1960's, its rationale was clear: schools cannot and should not accept the premise

that ignorance is preferable to knowledge in any area that concerns students. The educational system must do its part in helping youngsters develop the knowledge and skills which will enhance their ability to address the social pressures associated with family living and human sexuality.

Over time, though, the curriculum has undergone a number of changes that reflect changing knowledge and a changing world. The new revised curriculum, based on the original 1967 document, deals with many of the changes that have taken place in our society since the old syllabus was written. It includes a discussion of the variety of family structures present in our society today. It deals with the reality of homosexuality and the dangers of AIDS. To do otherwise would ignore what is happening in the world, as well as the most eminent medical opinion. For example, the Board believed that it had an obligation to deal clearly with the latter two issues after Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, in his report on AIDS, said: "We need sex education in the schools and . . . it must include information on heterosexual and homosexual relationships." At age-appropriate levels, the revised curriculum also discusses topics such as masturbation, contraceptives, abortion, sexual abuse prevention, sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS, low birthweight prevention, and homosexuality.

These topics are presented and handled in a straight-forward and factual manner. That does not mean the curriculum is without a moral or ethical dimension. Rather, it means that responsibility in public education is to recognize that society is pluralistic and, as a result, a curriculum in the public schools cannot be based upon the moral code of any one faith. Instead, this program stresses the universal moral values which are an integral part of this curriculum—truth and honesty; recognition of someone's worth; respect for one's own body and those of others; the importance of responsible decision-making and communication; that parenting requires responsibility; that the family, in all of its many forms, is an essential component of society; and that abstinence outside of marriage is the wisest, as well as the safest, course. In all cases, youngsters are encouraged to communicate with their families and to learn their family values related to these issues.

This program is best taught from a moral perspective, which encourages the highest aspirations of each individual while preserving the democratic values of individual liberty. There does not have to be a contradiction between individual rights and parents' best hopes for their children. In discussing topics which are value-laden, however, teachers make it clear that different people have different points of view about acceptance and morality of various behaviors. Teachers also point out the negative aspects of premature sexual activity. The teacher can, in helping to clarify his or her values, say to the thirteen-year-old: "There are compelling reasons why it doesn't make sense for you to have sex until you're older

and can handle the situation." The efforts of the school can clearly be supplemented by families providing their own family values for their children, and by religious institutions offering religious teaching. All children are owed the opportunity to receive the knowledge, skills and values that they need. The job of the home is to communicate what those specific values are. The job of the schools is to help young people clarify those values. An old Zen expression says: "When the mind is ready, a teacher appears." Although the home, in conjunction with cultural and religious input, should still be the child's primary source of information about family living and sexuality, schools must provide the opportunity to reinforce and expand this learning process.

### CONCLUSION

Obviously, dealing with the problem of increased sexual activity cannot be solved by a curriculum alone. It requires much more active involvement by parents, the larger community, and religious institutions. It means that, while recognizing the importance of pluralism and different cultural perspectives, government—and the school system—should not be afraid to make distinctions between what behavior is right and what is wrong, between what is socially destructive and what is responsible. In addition, it means increasing programs which encourage pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers to stay in school and, consequently, to remain part of society. Already twenty-one LYFE Centers are in existence, which provide day care facilities for very young children, as well as several high schools for pregnant girls (which have the ability to handle about 2,000 students a year). These are useful and important programs which should be expanded.

However, the role of sex education is also important. Information from around the country and experience makes this very clear:

- \* An extensive Baltimore study (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1986) reveals that, rather than increasing sexual activity, the dissemination of information about sexuality in schools actually delays the age of onset of sexual activity. Knowledge is not harmful.
- \* In a report prepared by the Office of Educational Assessment last year, fifty-four percent of the students in the *Family Living Including Sex Education* program reported that they spoke *more* to their parents as a result of these classes. The curriculum *is* strengthening family life.
- \* The Board is convinced that the Advisory Councils, which review and direct the curriculum, in every district and high school, provide an invaluable level of community participation.
- \* Parents may request that their children be excused from the pro-

gram, thus the assurance of personal freedoms and individual rights guarantees truly meaningful parental involvement.

It is important to recognize that overall results, guidelines, and goals do not tell the whole story of this program. The story includes many young people and adults who have been deeply and positively affected by this program. Examples of this group include:

- \* The thirteen-year-old girl in eighth grade who no longer feels she has to say "yes" to sexual involvement in order to feel good about herself;
- \* The mother of three children in a parent workshop who, for the first time, is understanding the miracle of the birth process and feels she can be a little more "askable" with her three children;
- \* The young man of seventeen-years-old who realizes that he has put all the responsibility on his girlfriend in sexual decision-making, and is willing to wait because he loves her;
- \* The ten-year-old girl who now has the words to describe the sexual abuse she experienced from her uncle and has the courage and feels safe enough to disclose it;
- \* The eighteen-year-old who feels that he is normal even though he is *not* sexually active;
- \* The priest, rabbi, and school official sitting around the same table respecting and understanding each other's point of view just a little bit more;
- \* The thousands of young people who will wake up tomorrow feeling just a little bit better about themselves.

Every person has the obligation to learn which values he holds most dear. He must also, through questioning, uncertainty, and struggles with his own deepest beliefs, appreciate the convictions of others.

The *Family Living Including Sex Education* program will help youngsters make responsible decisions, lessen prejudice, and increase tolerance towards others. It seeks to promote dignity, equity, and worth to all. In contrast with much of the recent public debate, the Board of Education's *Family Living Including Sex Education* curriculum makes sense in concept, in process, and in practice. It faces a set of realities which neither the schools nor the larger society can avoid. At the same time it asserts larger social truths and basic family values.