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(Pro)creationism in Schools

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Written in 1891, Spring Awakening, a play by Frank Wedekind, dealt with adolescent sexuality, abortion, homosexuality, rape and suicide. Censored by German officials, Spring Awakening did not have its debut until 1906. In its signature scene, a teenager examines his school's encyclopedia for information about sex -- and finds nothing. "What's the good of an encyclopedia that doesn't answer the most pertinent question in the world?," he asks.

Since then, Jonathan Zimmerman, a professor of education at New York University, reminds us, sex education remains a divisive issue everywhere. In Too Hot To Handle, the first global history of the subject, Zimmerman demonstrates that now, as in Wedekind's time, a consensus has not been reached about whether sex education should be taught to children and adolescents in schools -- and if so what values should be embedded in the curriculum. Impressively researched and informative, the book makes a persuasive case that sex education has not had -- and, in all likelihood, cannot have -- a significant impact, one way or the other, on the onset or frequency of intercourse, teenage pregnancy or venereal diseases.

At bottom, Zimmerman points out, the argument for sex education was about modernity. Arguing that fashion and films delivered tutorials about sex that were far more powerful than sermons about birds and the bees served up by stammering parents, advocates looked to schools to stem the tide. But they faced "world of faith and family, which rejected state authority and
guarded its own." Abstaining from sex until marriage, a Canadian educator insisted, "was the most patriotic, indeed the most God-like work a boy can ever aim at."

The availability of birth control pills and the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s, and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, raised the stakes. In the United States, advocates of sex education appeared to gain ground. In 1979, according to Zimmerman, virtually all schools in America offered some instruction on the subject. That said, teachers, who were nervous about igniting an adverse reaction among parents, rarely did more than give "plumbing lessons;" failing to examine social and cultural contexts and the "four taboos" (masturbation, contraception, abortion, and homosexuality), they tended to instruct students to abstain. Asked by a student what contraception method a 16-year-old should use, Zimmerman reports, a teacher replied, "Sleep with your grandmother." By 1980, moreover, nine states mandated that parents could withdraw their children from sex education classes; five others parental consent for students to enroll.

In 2001, the Bush administration decreed that U.S. sex education to other countries would be limited to abstinence only instruction. And abstainers, especially in what used to be called the Third World, often carried the day. In many countries, Zimmerman indicates, ignorance was rampant. Eighty percent of girls in Nepal did not know that a healthy-looking person could be infected with HIV. In India, 80% of young women seeking an abortion did not understand that sexual intercourse causes pregnancy. And 60% of teenagers in Zimbabwe told researchers that birth control leads to infertility.

Sex educators, Zimmerman writes, cite these statistics, among others, as arguments for more sex education. He acknowledges, however, that "it is unclear just how much schools could affect student beliefs -- and even more, student behavior -- on matters related to sex." Because sex education in schools is not grounded in the scientific evidence that grounds -- or should ground -- discussions of evolution and human-made climate change, parents and politicians can and do insist that the judgments of experts should not trump their own values and their authority.

When it comes to sex, it seems clear, chapters in a textbook on anatomy, dating, marriage and family are no match for Hustler, Playgirl, R-rated movies, and music videos. Try as they might, Zimmerman concludes, with a mixture of realism, resignation, and regret that many of his readers are likely to share, schools will always be "a step -- or three -- behind the sexual curve."