

ON THE COVER:

BY KATHLEEN VAIL

# What Do You



*Controversial curriculum topics  
can test your board's policymaking*

**S**chool boards once made curriculum decisions simply by conferring with the administrators and content specialists in their districts. Those days, as you probably already know, are gone. Now, parents and community members increasingly want—and expect—a say in what and how schools are teaching their children.

Certain subjects invite more emotional participation from

the community than others. The teaching of evolution has a long history of controversy that doesn't appear to be dying down anytime soon. Sex education's many components—contraception, sexually transmitted disease, homosexuality, abortion, and abstinence—make this small slice of your health curriculum a potential landmine. Social studies also can include hot-button ideological topics, churning up debate on

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how American history should be presented, as well as questions about how to include the individual history of racial and ethnic groups.

These are not the only subjects that elicit controversy—remember the reading wars, and the occasional requests to ban books? But when these curriculum hot buttons come up on your board agenda, you can pretty much guarantee you're in for crowded meetings and a rocky ride.

## THE ROLE OF CHOICE

Why do parents and community members get so involved in issues that once were the exclusive domain of educators? One reason is the rise of the school choice movement, says David Plank, codirector of the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University.

The number of charter schools in the United States grows every year. More districts and whole states, including Michigan, allow parents to choose their schools within districts and even public schools in other districts. Armed with this power, parents are making their voices heard in unprecedented ways.

School choice “has made it obligatory for boards to be more responsive to parents, because parents have options,” says Plank, who has studied the movement’s effect on Michigan’s schools. “If they are unhappy, they can leave. Boards are competing to keep their own students and attract new ones. They try to be very attentive to what parents expect. This happens across the curriculum.”

Plank gives an example of a recent debate over the math curriculum in one Michigan district. Two decades ago, the school board would have told parents that the curriculum would be chosen based on what staff members and research said was best. Plank says the board’s solution in this case reflects the times: It established two tracks of math, so parents could enroll their child in the more traditional track if they wanted.

“In a competitive environment generally, parents have increased leverage to choose an alternative school,” says Plank. “It has both good and bad consequences for professional educators.”

Articles on the following pages look at three hot-button curriculum issues.

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In defense of parents, he says, educators in the past “were too free to impose their own preferences. Parents’ anxieties were not unjustified.”

## INTERSECTION OF TENSION

Cultural and religious tensions among Americans also are responsible for the increase in parent involvement in curriculum issues. Topics such as evolution and sex education cut across religious beliefs, cultural values, and science. And school and community conflicts arise at that intersection.

School districts in large and small communities alike have seen the rise of grassroots special interest groups. These groups may bubble up at the local level, but many have the backing of larger national organizations. That backing usually includes money for legal battles against school boards when interest

groups want to see changes in the curriculum.

“They have enormous resources. It’s incredibly frightening to a little local school district to even have to get legal input and mount opposition to the pressure,” says Janice Irvine, a sociology professor at the University of Massachusetts and author of *Talk About Sex*, a book that traces the history of sex education.

Maryland’s Montgomery County Public Schools saw this happen last spring in its affluent suburban community outside Washington, D.C. Two local groups—Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum and Parents and Friends of Ex-Gays and Gays—sued the school board over teacher materials that were to be included in an eighth- and 10th-grade health unit on different lifestyles. The two groups were aided by the Liberty Counsel, a conservative Florida-based group that was once affiliated with the Rev. Jerry Falwell.

The groups prevailed in the lawsuit, with a federal judge agreeing that the material was biased against some religions. As part of the agreement, the school board had to reimburse the two groups \$36,000 in legal fees, money that went to the Liberty Counsel. The board also scrapped the sex education unit and formed another citizens committee to come up with a new curriculum.

Judith Bresler, who has been Montgomery County’s board attorney for 25 years, says the lawsuit came as no surprise to her or to the board. “There’s been an increase in the activity of religious groups in the community on a whole variety of subjects,” she says. “The board knew it was a controversial issue. That was not unexpected. Someone is going to be unhappy.”

Plank says the efforts of parents and special interest groups to shape the content of what is taught to children “go to the heart of what we expect from public schools.” He believes board members should ask themselves: How do schools respond to Christian parents who want one curriculum and parents who want a secular curriculum? Can the common curriculum survive?

“To what extent do we respond to parents in trying to tailor a curriculum for their children?” he asks.

For about a half century, our society agreed on what public schools should be: secular, but Protestant influenced, Plank says. “That broke down, and now we are in a state of advanced confusion about what role public school should play in a diverse, pluralistic society,” he says. “It opens up profound questions.”

## **POLICIES ARE THE BEST PRACTICE**

School boards can find themselves surprised by strong emotions—their own and those of their board colleagues and the community—when controversial curriculum issues arise. Last year, that happened when Florida’s Sarasota School Board dealt with community concerns over Planned Parenthood speakers in sex education classes.

“It was difficult, and it has an impact,” board member Laura Benson says. “People won’t speak to each other. There are peo-

ple who won’t speak to me anymore over this. It brings such a high level of emotions to the community.”

Sandra Gundlach, director of research and training for the National School Boards Association in Alexandria, Va., recommends that districts have a policy on how the board will receive community input. When boards have a set policy—such as how long the public can address the board and at what times during meetings they can speak—community members understand they are being treated fairly.

When she was a school board member in Minnesota, Gundlach says, her board heard concerns from a community group about the district’s sex education program. The board weathered the controversy more easily because it had a process for dealing with curriculum concerns. When a concern or complaint came up, the board referred it to the curriculum committee. After the committee reviewed the matter, Gundlach says, the board then made the decision to “continue, adjust, or delete” the curriculum.

As board members, it’s important to remember not to engage in conversation with or debate community members who have curriculum concerns, Gundlach says. When board members respond or question community members, they could give the appearance of agreeing or of already having made a decision. This notion can be a tough sell for new board members, she says, especially because they don’t want to look unresponsive to the community.

Politics, not just those of the ideological variety, also play a role in controversies over curriculum issues. Disgruntled parents become disgruntled voters, and sometimes candidates for the board. And candidates who run on a single issue and win often retain their adversarial view of the board even after they’ve joined it.

Dick Anderson, NSBA’s associate executive director of federation member services, says single-issue board members have trouble fitting in and working with their colleagues to benefit the entire district. “That’s a problem,” he says.

Schools have always been the place where different ideologies and groups battle for influence over what children learn, and that won’t be changing anytime soon. Board members who’ve been caught in the crossfire of these battles find themselves wishing the public would get just as passionate about student achievement or the other pressing problems that schools face today.

Bresler, the Montgomery County board attorney, says schools are the flashpoint for emotion and controversy for a good reason.

“Schools have two things that mean an awful lot to people—their children and their money,” she says. “That’s why people get involved. Parents are concerned about topics that will make an impression. Everyone is concerned about impressionability of kids.”

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