

Educated Quest

An open book on education politics, policy and technology

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The Sex Ed Chronicles Q&A with Stuart Nachbar

Why did you write *The Sex Ed Chronicles*?

I had always wanted to write a book and I always loved pursuing “what-if” scenarios in American history. I also have a good understanding of K-12 and higher education because I’d done business with schools throughout my working life, as well as a good working knowledge of New Jersey politics.

I wanted to write historical fiction based on events that happened in my adult life, including some I had lived through personally. I graduated from a school system that went through a long and bitter teacher’s strike in 1977, my senior year in high school. Three years later, parents protested against mandatory sex education and one of the protest leaders, a minister’s wife, was elected to the school board. She was the highest vote getter! I also lost my mother to cancer during this time and wanted to experience how our breakfast table political discussions would have continued had she lived through the start of my working life.

I also found some scary parallels between 1980 and today: conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan, economic worries at home, rising gas prices, diminished confidence in presidential leadership at home and abroad, and ‘culture war’ debates over intelligent design (known as Creationism back then), gay rights, and sex education.

Why, besides historical reasons, did you choose sex education as the main political issue?

Sex education requires a major investment of time on the parts of parents and educators as well as teachers and money because it’s offered in all grades and requires certified teachers who devote an entire school year to the subject. By comparison, intelligent design has affected a single unit of a middle school or high school biology class. Most important, sex education is always reevaluated whenever political winds blow in a new direction.

Can you tell us some of the events that helped form the basis for *The Sex Ed Chronicles*?

In 1980, New Jersey was the first state to mandate sex education in all grades in all public schools. At that time, approximately half the school districts offered some form of sex education and half did not, so there was no standard curriculum or guidelines from the state.

There were public hearings conducted by the state board of education and there were economic, as well as moral objections to teaching sex education, but the opposition was not well organized. The governor and the New Jersey Catholic Conference supported sex education provided the legislation, called the Family Life Act, require local advisory committees of parents and clergy review the curriculum. There was also strong support in the education and medical community; curtailing teenage pregnancy was a major impetus for the legislation.

It was ironic that New Jersey was the first state to mandate sex education during a high tide of political change in the nation and state. In 1980, our senior senator and a senior member of Congress, both Democrats, accepted bribes from FBI agents posing as Arab sheiks. It was realistic to expect the state to move from Democratic to Republican control. Ronald Reagan won New Jersey by over 400,000 votes in the presidential election. President Carter was unpopular in the state; he not only lost New Jersey in the general election, he also lost the Democratic primary to Edward Kennedy. In 1981, the voters elected a Republican governor, Tom Kean, by only 1,800 votes, but four years later, he was re-elected in a landslide.

What were some of the resources used to write *The Sex Ed Chronicles*?

I read published literature about the seventies, the 1980 elections, and of course, sex education and talked with politicians and educators, some I already knew from my work, and others introduced to me through friends. The most interesting resources were the transcripts of the actual state board of education hearings; there was only one copy on file in the State Archives and you could only take notes from it in pencil. I also read manuals for sex educators published during the 1970s, including a guide published by the National Education Association to help teacher's unions deal with "extremist" opposition.

What was the major fiction that you brought to the story?

I was curious to learn how a well-organized opposition group could have successfully defeated mandatory sex education, what they had to do right and what they could do wrong.

Such a group would need to be inclusive of all faiths and races; New Jersey has a more diverse population than most states. It would need a charismatic leader, like Ronald Reagan, who had the communications skills and resources to devote full-time to the cause. Lastly, New Jersey is a state where school politics are local. A statewide organization would need representation from locally elected officials, as well as parents, if it were to become as powerful as the state teachers association, so, I had my opposition group fund local school board races.

Where did you stand on sex education then, and where do you stand now?

I was in college when the Family Life Education Act passed and our high school did not offer sex education classes when I was there. I was shy and not part of the major social cliques, so I might have felt uncomfortable in a sex-ed class if it was taught by a poor or indifferent teacher.

I learned that sex education is too important a subject to be taught poorly. It's meant to impart lifelong lessons of human relations, familial and personal responsibility, as well as health. I prefer the comprehensive approach to sex education, including medically accurate information about contraceptives, to "abstinence only" instruction.

I don't believe that "abstinence only" programs would have been taken seriously by me, or my high school classmates in 1980, and I'm not sure the students at my alma mater would take them more seriously today. I do believe, however, that they might reinforce a message that students are already learning outside of school, for example, from their families or their church. But everyone does not receive the same messages from these outside influences; sometimes K-12 students may be receiving no messages at all.

What qualified you to write *The Sex Ed Chronicles*?

I have an excellent education in practical politics from Rutgers. I also worked five years for a deputy mayor and helped him represent a city government to C-level executives and government officials, including education policy. I've done community affairs consulting for government agencies and non-profits and have done business with colleges and universities for almost a decade. I also lived through some of the events described in the story, including a teacher's strike where I watched teachers sentenced to jail by a county judge. I've also spent a lot of time in newsrooms and at media events during my working life.

Your main character, the reporter Greg Mandell, is not a typical 'hero'.

Greg's character was based largely on my attitudes towards life and politics in 1980, had I decided to become a newspaper reporter. While I had my notions of "truth and justice" back then, I was not a social butterfly, nor was I remotely aware of sex education, but I was a wiseass at times. I'm also lucky that, like Greg, I've been married to a wonderful woman for more than 20 years.

Is Greg's alma mater similar to your high school?

Matawan Regional High School, which I attended until I graduated in 1978, had a sports culture that revolved around football in the fall. I would guess that when you counted the players, marching band, majorettes and, whoever was selling programs or food to raise money for a club or charity, that about a third of the student body was involved in producing a home football game.

I went to a couple of games while I was researching the book; the culture is stronger in some ways than it was three decades ago. Today, you see fans wear jerseys in the school's colors, as you'd find at a college or pro game, and you see a few tailgate lunches before the games. There are also volunteer assistant coaches and summer football camps.

However, my high school was more supportive of artistic and academically inclined students than the Averdell High in my story. My graduating class would have been the envy of any public or private high school in the country.

You also dealt with student free press rights as well as sex education.

If a sex education class were to be proposed for a high school, a small group of politically aware students would be curious to ask questions and report about this issue to their peers. I also felt they would have a difficult time reporting about sex education in a school paper if the idea was unpopular with their parents. There are teachers who would support the students, as well as teachers who would be afraid to get between students and their parents.

Andi Gilardi, my main female character is a young, untenured teacher who might have learned about sex education in college in the seventies, during a more liberal period in the history of higher education. It was more credible to have her side with her students—and that made for an interesting conflict.

Andi got only partial vindication.

Correct. I spoke with a former superintendent of schools during my research and consulted other educators about that outcome. The superintendent told me that he'd grant Andi tenure, but have her reassigned to another school, or he'd help her find a job in another school system. He would want to take her away from a principal, or colleagues who had actively opposed her tenure. I chose to follow his example.

What has happened with sex education in New Jersey since 1980?

Sex education enjoys popular support in New Jersey, however in 1999, the legislature passed an "abstinence is best" law and the state accepted federal money for "abstinence only" programming from 1997 through 2006.

At the end of 2006, Governor Jon Corzine refused to apply for the federal funds; the federal policy towards "abstinence until marriage" became too strict. It requires state recipients to teach "abstinence until marriage" sex education to students ages 12 through 29. However, privately sponsored organizations, including faith-based groups, are eligible to apply for federal funds under another program to teach the same thing.

That opened a new can of worms, because the messages from the public schools would be different from those in the federally sponsored private programs.

Do you have other stories in the works?

Yes, I have completed a manuscript for *Defending College Heights*, a crime novel based on a veteran political reporter's investigation into the murder of an Army recruiter within a corrupt college town. I've also started work on a story focused on women's high school and college basketball. I want to build on a body of work focused on education politics. There's no shortage of story ideas!