AIDS — AND HUMAN SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN KANSAS: A BIOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

In May 1987, the Kansas State Board of education adopted eight "Recommendations Regarding Human Sexuality Education." Consequently, all school districts will be required to "... provide a comprehensive, elementary and secondary school, developmentally appropriate program in human sexuality and information about sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, no later than September, 1988." However, there is a unique exclusion clause in SBR 91-31-3: 8 (g) (2) (D), which states the program shall "include procedures whereby any pupil, whose parent or guardian so requests, shall be excused from any or all portions of the program without any penalty resulting from such action."

Kansas is only the third of five states to require such programs. Seven other states are pending, and thirty-eight states are making no public efforts to require AIDS and human sexuality education in school curricula.

While a "model curriculum" is often envisaged where AIDS- and human sexuality education build gradually from grades K through 12, with a cadre of coordinated teachers expanding simple lessons on "animal families" into a comprehensive high school treatment of the biology, sociology and home economics/family life courses, for the near future only a limited number of "hired guns" will likely be delivering "sex-ed," and at a limited number of interception points.

A difficult problem is how to insert the topic into the curriculum in courses that intercept all students and where there will be time to cover the topic fully.

Biology classes could intercept most high school students in their freshman or sophomore year and provide the time to cover nearly all of the basic information on human sexuality. Biology teachers will likely have the least deficit in knowledge relative to AIDS and new developments in human reproductive biology. Spread across human anatomy, genetics, biological basis of behaviors, immune systems and virology, human sexuality and AIDS—education can be treated normally among other systems, and will be so fragmented that it will be difficult for students to be exempted just from those sections that bear on sexuality.

However, incorporating AIDS and sexuality education into biology classes is still not a panacea, and it poses other problems. Kansas continues to leak large numbers of high school graduates without any biology coursework. The single biology course is already overcrowded with vital concepts,
and some aspects of sexuality are beyond the scope of biology as well.

During the 1970’s, a large percentage of students avoided biology altogether in the many states (including Kansas) that lowered requirements to one-science-to-graduate. Today, with the two-science-classes-to-graduate rule, biology is still not mandated at the state level (although some local schools require it) and some school districts are continuing to graduate students with only general, physical and/or earth sciences. Currently, about 10% of our entering college freshmen have never taken one biology course in their secondary schooling, and it is likely that those who do not go to college include an even higher percentage who avoid the biology class. Since health and family life courses do not usually cover body membranes, virology, immune systems, specific sexual behaviors, etc., that means many Kansas residents who have "successfully" graduated from our schools are unable to fully understand public health AIDS-education materials presented on television, or vote knowledgeably on future issues in human genetics, surrogate parenthood, etc. While Kansas left a large window open in the 1970's that graduated a large number of biology-ignorant citizens, that window is smaller but not yet closed.

Biology teachers will have to carve away critical sections of a one-year general biology course to provide time to cover sexuality education adequately. This dilemma has existed for years as additional ecological, genetic, and cellular aspects were added. However, biology's share of the high school curriculum has changed little in the last 50 years while biological concepts vital to the lives of every man and woman have expanded far faster than changing concepts in other major disciplines. Canadian and other foreign students rarely graduate from secondary levels with less than two years of biology, and human sexuality is naturally included. The preoccupation and "up-tightness" about sex, the intolerance of homosexuals, and the rampant fear of AIDS are primarily U.S. phenomena and they are not unrelated to the fact that we have a biology-ignorant public by educated-world standards. Until we are willing to provide a minimum of two years of biology to high school students, we will simply be addressing one concern at the expense of another.

AIDS is the epidemic of the 1980's and we will have to neglect other systems in order to switch resources towards teaching the reproductive system, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, immune system, and viruses. But if the next epidemic centers on the lungs or the liver, and those are the areas we shortchanged today, then we may have done as much damage to the next generation as we helped. Most of the current adult population was educated before the 1981
definition of AIDS. Yet how many of us who taught, or studied, biology before 1981 realized at that time how critical it was to illustrate the extent of membrane protection, to elaborate on the immune system, or to contrast various viruses? Yet, these are the very basic understandings that are lacking among those calling for quarantines and excluding children with AIDS from school.

Today, we know to "stick to our guns." We need a biology-intelligent public. We must include AIDS and the biological aspect of sex-education in biology courses; but we must likewise not forsake any other critical concepts.

Research in human sexual biology is still catching up with our understanding of other systems, and this means rapid change in current wisdoms: circumcision once considered cancer-preventive is now considered ineffectual, the birth control pill once suspected of encouraging some cancers is now known to be mildly preventive, IUD's once considered birth control of choice are now risky and being removed from the market. All of these turn-around's in our understanding occurred, like AIDS, since 1981. Since classroom textbooks require several years production time and last nearly a decade in the classroom, it is guaranteed that should your classroom text address these topics, the material will be dated if not erroneous. As with medical doctors, teachers of human sexuality will have to update their knowledge by using journal literature.

However, the rapid developments in reproductive biology do not mean that teachers have to develop all their materials themselves. And for many teachers, AIDS- and sex-education will be a new prep on top of other teaching responsibilities. Outlines for use in lesson planning, test banks, overhead materials and films—all appropriate for the local Kansas situation—are vital for the busy teacher who has taken on this important part of the curriculum. Burt and Meeks' Education for Sexuality provides excellent content outlines and overhead materials for elementary and junior high human sexuality classes. It is adequate for high school and provides many useful exercises, but fails to include sufficient recent biology and fails to provide citations to substantiate statements. Several human sexuality texts, including the fourth edition of McCary's pioneering Human Sexuality include the depth in biology and the journal citations to back up occasionally disputed material. For many instructors, the most difficult knowledge to gain and impart will be that of sex role development and variations in gender identity. John Money and Anke Ehrhardt's Man and Woman, Boy and Girl remains the best summary of "...variations in attitude and behavior within the sexual spectrum of both male and female."
As educators we realize that society eventually pays a price whenever a student graduates and is still ignorant of the basics in our field. In human sexuality, this ignorance is particularly poignant when we see how often it leads to divorce, lack of compassion, fear, and much needless suffering. The recent case of the Ray family in Florida with three AIDS antibody positive hemophiliac children--threatened if they attended school, their home finally burned--underscores that the price of this ignorance is too high for any of us to accept. Human sexuality educators in all disciplines are the only ones who can remedy this. The right of educators to deliver appropriate factual material and have students think about these issues will be challenged, and the Kansas exclusion clause seems to encourage this. Nevertheless, we have the duty and obligation to "hang tough" and insist that students intelligently face their real world.

On August 24, 1987, a three-judge Federal Appeals Court ruled that public school students can be required to read and discuss textbooks although the lessons may not conform with their religious beliefs. Chief Judge Pierce Lively ruled that reading and discussing assigned materials did not require "...the student to affirm or deny a religious belief or to engage or refrain from engaging in any act either required or forbidden by the students' religious convictions." Teachers of human sexuality are presenting a core of basic knowledge, from anatomy to "masturbation does not cause acne." While some groups may want students to live in ignorance of these facts, the Appeals Court ruling substantiates your students' right to read and discuss.

John Richard Schrock
Division of Biological Sciences
Emporia State University