



The Sex Education Debates

Nancy Kendall

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Educating children and adolescents in public schools about sex is a deeply inflammatory act in the United States. Since the 1980s, intense political and cultural battles have been waged between believers in abstinence until marriage and advocates for comprehensive sex education. In *The Sex Education Debates*, Nancy Kendall upends conventional thinking about these battles by bringing the school and community realities of sex education to life through the diverse voices of students, teachers, administrators, and activists.

Drawing on ethnographic research in five states, Kendall reveals important differences and surprising commonalities shared by purported antagonists in the sex education wars, and she illuminates the unintended consequences these protracted battles have, especially on teachers and students. Showing that the lessons that most students, teachers, and parents take away from these battles are antithetical to the long-term health of American democracy, she argues for shifting the measure of sex education success away from pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection rates. Instead, she argues, the debates should focus on a broader set of social and democratic consequences, such as what students learn about themselves as sexual beings and civic actors, and how sex education programming affects school-community relations.

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