



Written by [Beverly K. Eakman](#) on October 20, 2010

School Sex Surveys Circumvent Parents' Wishes

On Friday (Oct. 15), FOX News reported that a middle school in Washington, D.C., got itself in hot water with parents after having distributed one of today's ubiquitous sex surveys to students. Somehow this kind of thing always comes as "news" to parents, despite the fact that such goings-on have been publicized all over the country for years. Are people in denial, or what?



This particular survey, developed by Metro TeenAIDS, a group dedicated to "helping" young people fight against HIV/AIDS, was aimed at raising awareness of sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs) and teaching children how to avoid them, according to FOX News. Never mind that teens and pre-teens are plenty aware of HIV, AIDS, STDs and just about any sexual gymnastic on the planet. How could they not be? Peruse any magazine aimed at young people. See the sitcoms targeted to the 11- and 15-year-old demographic. Then, there is sex education, which typically starts nowadays in first grade.

As for intimate questionnaires, these started in the early 1980s with a few demographic questions. Getting only sporadic opposition from parents, the authors added queries concerning socio-economic status (SES) studies. Again, officials dodged negative publicity, so test creators started inserting a few opinion-type questions at random into bona fide academic tests at selected schools.

That's when things became a little dicey. Several brouhahas ensued once parents got wind of the questions from their kids. In West Alexander, Pennsylvania, for example, a group of parents started researching the source of such nosiness and discovered, to their dismay, that the questions were coming through contractors simultaneously creating tests under the auspices of both federal and state governments, which in turn got passed along to local education agencies. The universal reaction from the children was that "no one could possibly study for a test like that." Letters back and forth between federal and state legislators and local school officials read like a "blame game" on steroids.

With that, West Alexander parents started digging and found that the offending instruments were not called a "test," per se, but rather an "assessment." Upon further examination, the term assessment turned out to be a way to hedge the legal definition of testing. Even so, all responses were graded, with personal queries rated on a scale of "preferred response," the highest known as a "minimum positive response." The queries covered everything from politics to methods of home discipline, to drug abuse, race and sex. The problem was, in the late 1980s it was still illegal to ask personal and/or psychological



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questions of minors without a parent's or guardian's knowledge and written consent, a step bypassed by the Pennsylvania State Education Agency's Division of Testing.

Then West Alexander parents dug deeper, into Pennsylvania's regional computer system for professionals, the Research Information Resources in Education (RISE) database. There, they located a 1986 document from James P. Shaver, "National Assessment of Values and Attitudes for Social Studies," linked to ERIC, the Educational Resource and Information Center, a federal database. Shaver placed an entirely new spin on what most people thought of as "cognitive" learning.

Shaver wrote that there is an intellectual component plus an "affective," or emotional, component to every shred of knowledge that passes through a person's awareness. In other words, a person has to have some feeling-or-other about the information; it is rarely, if ever, entirely "neutral." On that basis, Shaver reasoned that it was permissible to include values and attitudes on societal and controversial issues in both testing and curriculum. Shaver went on to describe why moral values often "defy easy definition" and "conflict with one another." By way of example, he alluded to the promotion of freedom of the press, a constitutional ideal that conflicted with national security "in the *Pentagon Papers* case."

What Shaver didn't mention, of course, was that the *Pentagon Papers* case had more to do with a deliberate and politically motivated "leak" than with the public's "right to know." But the moms in Pennsylvania were closer to that case in the 1980s than folks are today, and therefore knew this. They didn't think middle-schoolers (then usually known as "junior high-school kids") were sufficiently educated or mature to be holding forth on topics of that nature. Thus, they objected to social studies questions that asked their children about their own, or their parents', opinion on freedom of the press as it might relate to Daniel Ellsberg's infamous leak in 1971 to the *New York Times*.

The last straw was when parents discovered pilot projects all around the country — Minnesota, Nebraska, Indiana and Michigan — being launched at a frenetic pace in out-of-the-way, rural localities as well as in some inner-city schools. The end game apparently was to "get the bugs out," to gauge the level of resistance (if any), and to experiment with the then-new concept of data-sharing between local, state and federal educational computer systems. The hub resided at the federal Education Department office known today as the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

Significant as that was, it turned out to be the least of parents' worries back in the late 1980s. Pennsylvania and Michigan parents discovered that the curricula brought to the schools on the basis of students' responses to personal questions were being implemented with federal dollars under Titles III and IV of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Some were even "validated" (government-speak for a Good Housekeeping-style seal of approval) and placed in a nationally accessible curricular database called the National Diffusion Network (NDN). Had this process been pursued, it would have been seen as hugely illegal at the time, but isolated parents' groups didn't have the resources to launch a ground-breaking, class-action lawsuit.

Meanwhile, plans were already afoot beginning in 1976 and 1978 to take computer systems (and therefore, educational data-sharing) national. This was reported at length by the bible of the professional education establishment, *Education Week*.

So all the small-scale hissy-fits really accomplished was to define for federal and state education officials exactly what they had to do to "sell" personal and intimate questionnaires to the public. Educators were anxious to divest parents of too much involvement in their children's schoolwork, as "programmed learning" (meaning lessons via computer) was already in the pipeline, too.



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What to do?

The Education Establishment hit upon a brainstorm: health classes!

Already, courses like physiology were deemed too difficult for middle- and even high-schoolers. If kids couldn't spell "constitutional" or write a coherent paragraph, there was little chance they would comprehend the stages of periodontal disease or diverticulitis. But there wasn't a kid alive who didn't find something interesting about sex and human genitalia.

In the 1960s and 1970s, child "experts" were still able to convince naïve grown-ups that a huge segment of the parent population was too embarrassed to talk to their children about sex. Article after article decried the fact that young women were entering into marriage with no idea what to expect on their wedding night, and that young girls thought something was wrong with them when they started menstruating. So, persuading parents that it was incumbent upon the school to use the real terms for private parts of the male and female anatomy was a relatively easy "sell," especially if it was sold in the context of "science" and "health." Did parents want their children absorbing inaccurate information off the streets?

That worked until the first wave of Baby Boomers — the generation of drugs, sex, rock-'n-roll (and Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* magazine) — became parents themselves. At that point, the argument that parents were embarrassed to talk about sex wore a bit thin.

Enter the sex survey. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the spread of HIV and AIDS, along with the precipitous rise in STDs, single teen motherhood, and casual sex ("hook-ups") made school sex questionnaires a "compelling state interest" under the catch-all of "prevention." Oddly, reading and math did not rise to that critical level, and in fact the federal government played up the fact that it could not get involved in "local decisions" about "best" curricula and teaching methods, even though it was already doing so through their database, the NDN. But most parents had no knowledge of that, so the sex survey worked its way from fairly mild questions about bodily functions, to a graphic panoply of how-to's, "safe sex" products for both mouth and private parts, birth control methods and abortion counseling.

Enter the DC sex survey at Hardy Middle School. What was so off-putting about that at this juncture?

For openers, 12-year-old pupils were asked not merely to check off their genders, but specifically whether they were male, female, or transgendered. They had "to identify themselves as straight, bisexual, gay, lesbian or 'not sure.'" They were asked "the difference between oral, vaginal, and anal sex"; where they would obtain condoms if "you or a friend needed them"; and whether they would be able to "correctly put a condom on yourself or your partner." The survey also wanted the student's entire sexual history — specifically, what types of sex. (By contrast, most 12-year-olds of the 1950s were just learning from their parents where babies came from and about menstruation).

In typical fashion, the opt-out letter to parents regarding the D.C. questionnaire, as well as any information on this unit in "health," went out the same day that the "assessment" (not test, remember?) was administered. Consequently, there was no way for parents to refuse. Once the fire hit the fan and parents complained, the school district said, essentially, oops, sorry; we meant to send the letter sooner. *Sure* they did, just like Pennsylvania's Division of Testing in West Alexander in 1986.

It wasn't the first time. The Fairfax County, Virginia, School Board gave parents scant notice in 2003, when schools there disseminated a 169-question sex survey to their 13-, 15-, and 17-year-olds, going so far as to divert \$60,000 earmarked for educational purposes to ask pupils about oral sex, number of



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partners, depression, and suicide. In 2002, a flap occurred over New Jersey's Ridgewood High School's 156-question survey entitled "Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors" — again under the umbrella of "prevention" — this assessment being a brainchild of the Minneapolis-based Search Institute, making it all the more difficult for parents to locate the source.

Most school officials are aware that data collected aren't really anonymous, though they give students and parents that impression. Rather the data are labeled "confidential" — i.e., responses are typically "slugged" (pre-identified), computerized and disclosed on a "need to know" basis.

Parents, of course, aren't in the need-to-know loop. They're deemed nuisances to be circumvented, not cooperating partners. Dr. Karen Effrem, parent and pediatrician with the Maple River Education Coalition in St. Paul, Minnesota, testified at a hearing there. She said the No Child Left Behind [NCLB] law, like its predecessors, was skewed against parents, especially when it came to tests, surveys, questionnaires and polls.

If parents are really cooperative, Dr. Effrem quipped, "federal and state government will allow them to participate in the educational decisions regarding their own children."

Moreover, on the basis of "confidential" responses to questionnaires distributed through health classes, curricula are devised and supplemental textbooks brought in to address a variety of social issues. Powerful incentives are brought to bear so that as many children as possible "confess" to antisocial attitudes and sexual maladjustment. Kevin P. Dwyer, former president of the National Association of School Psychologists, defends psychological pop quizzes, explaining that this "valuable information [is] almost impossible to obtain from any other source...." He worries that a negative court ruling might prompt legislators to prohibit all questionnaires. Many parents, realizing their rights have been usurped and their children's heads filled with inappropriate ideas, wish the legal system would take a stand on their behalf.

Up until recently, asking minors to divulge information of an intimate, political, or illegal nature without parental knowledge or consent was unlawful, or at least unethical, and repeating the same questions in various formats so as to ensure the information compromises respondents was considered tantamount to "entrapment." In 1971 attorneys Charles W. Sherrer and Ronald A. Roston wrote in the *Federal Bar Journal* ("Some Legal and Psychological Concerns About Personality Testing in the Public Schools") that the courts had "recognized a common law action for invasion of privacy" and that "[i]t is highly unlikely that the average parent knows to what he is consenting when he signs a piece of paper stating that the school psychologists can examine his child." Other legal minds wrote similarly about personal "assessment" queries. When the parent isn't aware a psychological exam has even taken place, it pushes the matter into a whole different category.

On the other side of the debate, behavioral testing advocate and test creator Richard M. Wolf justified the "permissibility of deception" in the psychological testing of children. However, he flat out admitted in 1969 that if the deception leads to testing results which work to the disadvantage of the test-taker, say in employment, then "deception in testing can be considered a form of entrapment" — a legal issue which, he allowed, had not been fully determined in real time. Unfortunately, parents failed to go to the mat and get a determination, so things got completely out of control.

For purposes of the D.C. sex survey, the pitch is "[r]aising awareness among students about HIV and AIDS..., [toward] the planning and execution of [a] sex education curriculum," as per D.C. Mayor-elect Vincent Gray's e-mail to *The Georgetown Dish* over the Hardy Middle School's handling of the offending



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survey. Gray wants the school's leadership, parents, and contract providers to talk about these recent developments to ensure that no one is surprised in the future."

Gray's comment here is, again, government-speak: How this proposed "talk" will work is that a professional change agent (a provocateur) will be brought in under the cover of being a moderator of the discussion. He or she will deftly pit the angry coalition of parents against a carefully selected "pro" faction, then exacerbate tensions until the "anti" group is thoroughly humiliated and acquiesces. This strategy goes by a variety of names — the Delphi Technique, the Alinsky Method, the Tavistock Approach, community activism — but what it is boils down to is the power of alienation and marginalization which in turn is based on Karl Marx's Theory of Alienation. American moms, in particular, do not like to be mocked or ostracized. Thus, year after year, they are out-maneuvered to the point where today, their prospects of turning schools around are dim indeed.

More politically sophisticated parents long ago saw the handwriting on the wall, and planned their children's education accordingly — homeschooling or a good private education. As prices increased, sometimes that worked out, and sometimes it didn't. In any case, these parents knew that the ringleaders of sex projects in the schools didn't want people like themselves calling the shots. They knew it was only a question of time before sex questionnaires and other personal, tell-all surveys would morph from can't-win, multiple choice items like: "When did you have your first intercourse?" to more graphic fare that would drive the curriculum and cut parents out.

FOX News pulled people's heads out of the sand by bringing to viewers' attention, once again, exactly how psychological fare has "morphed" since the 1980s, when there was only a handful of relatively tepid, personal probes that could be passed off as "cognitive."

To parents who argue that the survey reveals too much information for a 12-year-old, Metro TeenAIDS' executive director, Adam Tenner, told MyFoxDC.com that most of those kids were "much more experienced sexually" than parents might think.

Looking at it from West Alexander, 1984, it's not hard to see how they got that way.

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Photo: Parents from Massachusetts sit together before a Joint Committee on Education hearing at the Massachusetts Statehouse in Boston, on Jan. 31, 2006, concerning a health education bill that would add health classes, including sex education, to the list of subjects Massachusetts students in elementary through high school should learn: AP Images



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