After Roe, teens are teaching themselves sex ed, because the adults won't

By Hannah Natanson
August 23, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

FRANKLIN, Tenn. — Sweating in the sun, two dozen teenagers spread themselves across picnic blankets in a grassy park and prepared to discuss the facts of life they never learned in school.

Behind them on a folding table, bouquets of pamphlets offered information teachers at school would never share — on the difference between medical and surgical abortions, and how to get them. Beside the pamphlets sat items adults at school would never give: pregnancy tests and six-packs of My Way Emergency Contraceptive.

Emma Rose Smith, 17, rose from the blankets, tucked her pale-blonde hair behind her ears and turned off the music on a small, black speaker. She faced the assembled high-schoolers, all members of her newfound group, Teens for Reproductive Rights, and began talking about the nonprofit Abortion Care Tennessee. Her words hitched at first, then tumbled in a rush.

"A little bit about them," Emma Rose said, "is they're an organization that funds people's abortions if they can't afford it. Also, by the way, there's another organization that we can also talk about later, when we give you guys, like, resources, that actually does free mail-in abortion pills."

Twelve days after the teens' picnic, abortion would become illegal in Tennessee, a measure made possible by the Supreme Court's June decision, in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, overturning *Roe v. Wade*. The students wouldn't hear anything about it in school: State law does not require sex education, and it holds that schools in areas with high pregnancy rates must offer "family life education" focused on abstinence.

0:00/1:34

Listen to the Tennessee teens describe their experiences of sex education.

Post-*Roe*, the teens in the park had decided, this lack of education was no longer acceptable. They are part of a burgeoning movement of high-schoolers nationwide who, after *Roe*'s fall, are stepping up to demand more comprehensive lessons on reproduction, contraception and abortion — and who, if the adults refuse, are teaching each other instead.

In Utah, high-schoolers rallied outside a courthouse in May to call for accurate education on sex and abortion. In Texas, a group of teens held a virtual protest on the gaming website Minecraft to urge the state to start giving middle-schoolers lessons on birth control. Over the summer, that group — Fort Bend Students United for Reproductive Freedom —

began sharing mini-sex-education lessons to its Instagram account for the benefit of peers; recent posts include "Endometrial Ablation," "Pap smears" and "WHAT IS PCOS?" (polycystic ovary syndrome).

And in Virginia, 15-year-old Rivka Vizcardo-Lichter is organizing demonstrations outside school board meetings to pressure the Fairfax County district to offer students information about reproductive health clinics, more detailed lessons on contraceptive methods other than abstinence (it already includes the basics, but she wants more) — and access to contraception.

"Teenagers are teenagers, and some teenagers are going to have sex," she said. "They need to be educated on how to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies and STIs [sexually transmitted infections] and sexual risk — especially if we're removing the right to … choose whether or not you're having a baby."

Twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia require that students receive sex education at school, according to a tracker maintained by the nonprofit Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS). Thirty states demand that schools emphasize the importance of abstinence, and 16 states mandate "abstinence-only" sex education.

What students actually learn in the classroom varies by district and even by teacher, said Laura Lindberg, a public health professor at Rutgers University who has studied sex education in the United States for three decades. But it is often "too little too late," she said. Her research suggests that less than half of U.S. teens receive instruction on where to get birth control before having sex for the first time, and she noted that the teen birthrate in the United States — 16.7 births per 1,000 females in 2019 — is consistently among the highest in the developed world, though it has been declining in recent years.

In the Tennessee park, Emma Rose scrolled her thumb down her phone screen, squinting at the glare, to read off details of upcoming advocacy: An outdoor concert to raise money for pro-abortion groups. A protest at the Tennessee Capitol on the day the state's abortion ban takes effect.

Then she shared how she and the group's three co-founders, Alyson Nordstrom, Lily Swain and Paige Buckley, all 17, see the future.

"We want to start getting groups structured in different parts of Tennessee," Emma Rose said. Each spin-off chapter would be located at a different high school throughout the state.

Then those teens, too, could start teaching each other.

'Alone and ignorant'

In some parts of the country, teens teaching teens sex ed is not a new idea.

That includes Park City, Utah, where Carly McAleer started high school four years ago having received a sex education that "basically amounted to scaring students with really grotesque photos" of sexually transmitted infections. Utah law requires sex education in all schools but prohibits "the advocacy or encouragement of the use of contraceptive methods or devices," instead mandating that schools "stress the importance of abstinence."

By sophomore year, Carly, who is now 18 and uses they/them pronouns, began searching for a way to become better informed — and discovered the Planned Parenthood Teen Council program. The initiative, begun in 1989 in Washington state, trains teens to teach other schoolchildren sex education, then partners with willing private schools, school districts or community groups to host peer-led lessons on topics ranging from consent to contraception, depending on state law and school policy. Since its founding, it has expanded to 15 states, and last year 300 teens

volunteered on 31 councils, according to Nadya Santiago Schober of Planned Parenthood.

Carly applied, was accepted their junior year, and was soon walking into middle-school classrooms — feeling more than a bit nervous — to lead classes on STIs and healthy relationships. Carly found that most students, starved for information, were intensely curious.

And Carly came to love moments that demonstrated the difference they were making — for example when they asked students what kind of lubricant is okay to use with condoms, "the room went silent, and so I told them a silicone-based or water-based lubricant."

The end of *Roe* appears to have driven more interest in the Teen Council program, which is poised to expand, Santiago Schober said: "We are seeing an increase in the size of our groups for the year ahead." In Utah, said L-E Baldwin, a community health educator with that state's Planned Parenthood chapter, "we have had interest from rural parts of the state in ways we have not previously."

Lindberg, the Rutgers professor, said the upsurge in young people advocating for comprehensive sex education is admirable, if unsurprising in a generation known for its activism on climate change, gun control and reading freedom. She cautioned that it is important would-be student-teachers pick out correct information from the plethora of misinformation available online.

"Young people can now access information in places that a generation ago weren't an option, whether that's a YouTube video or a Tik Tok or something on Instagram," she said. "But they have to be careful."

And, she warned, anyone pushing for more sex education will face stiff opposition from mostly conservative parents and lawmakers who argue that it is inappropriate and will lead students to become promiscuous — despite a large body of research that shows providing sexual health information and services to students is not linked with increased sexual activity, and the fact that a majority of American adults across political lines support sex education in schools.

Since the 1980s, when sex education became widespread in America as a means to fight HIV infection, conservatives and the religious right have steadily chipped away at the availability of sex ed nationwide, Lindberg said. And they're especially fired up now, post-*Roe* and amid raging education culture wars that have delivered new laws restricting what teachers can say about race, racism, sexuality, gender identity and LGBTQ issues. As Charles Herbster, an unsuccessful gubernatorial candidate in Nebraska, put it at a rally alongside former president Donald Trump in May: "We're going to take sex education out of the schools and put it back in the homes where it belongs." (Herbster did not answer requests for comment.)

An ascendant parents' rights movement is also working to limit what students learn in school about sex — partly through measures that increase parental control over students' in-class reading choices and outlaw sexually explicit texts. Tiffany Justice, co-founder of the national parent group Moms for Liberty, said in an interview that "comprehensive sex ed has no place in school." She said school districts everywhere should convene groups of parents to determine what is "age appropriate" for children to learn.

She had a message for students advocating around sex ed: "The teenagers are being pushed by activist organizations, whose purpose is making children politically literate rather than actually literate so they can become social justice warriors. That's what the union is trying to do," she said, referring to teachers organizations, which Justice said are pushing communist doctrine on America's children.

In Virginia, Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin — who won his office by campaigning on education issues — this spring signed a law that requires school districts to notify parents whenever sexually explicit material is included in lessons, and to offer students non-explicit alternatives if parents request them.

Rivka, the Fairfax County teen, believes this law imperils students' access to sex education. She is all the more determined to persuade her school district to expand its sex-ed curriculum by teaching about more contraceptive options and reproductive health clinics, as well as offering students free contraception. Her sex-ed experience was

options and reproductive health clinics, as well as offering students free contraception. Her sex-ed experience was "abstinence 100" percent of the time, she said.

Fairfax sex ed comprises "an abstinence-based … curriculum, meaning that both abstinence and contraception are included in instruction," district spokeswoman Julie Moult said in a statement. "Contraception is included in instruction in grades 8-12," she added, pointing to teachings about "barrier, hormonal, and surgical contraceptive methods," including condoms. Parents can remove their children from the program if they wish.

Moult said the district mentions Planned Parenthood as a resource for "students experiencing unintended pregnancy" in 10th grade. But she said "inclusion of reproductive health clinics could be considered" by school officials in the future.

Moult previously told The Washington Post that giving students access to contraception would be "outside the scope and purpose" of sex ed. The Fairfax County School Board this spring voted to delay a series of proposed changes that would have expanded the topics covered in sex ed and ended gender segregation in some classes, an idea Rivka supports.

"We have millions of men who don't know how a period works," Rivka said, recalling conversations with male friends who were clueless about things like tampons and pads. "Teens are just going out into these waters alone and ignorant."

Teens wonder: Could we do better?

In Tennessee, Alyson Nordstrom had never so much as joined a march when *Roe* came under threat.

But on May 3, feeling the angriest she had ever been, she tapped out an Instagram message to Emma Rose Smith, who had helped organize a 10,000-strong protest after the killing of George Floyd: "I don't know if you saw the leaking of the Roe v Wade draft opinion from the Supreme Court but me and some of my friends [are] wanting to put together something in protest of that … I was wondering if you wanted to work together."

Emma Rose responded: "I would love too!"

The girls each brought in their friends, Lily Swain and Paige Buckley, and Teens for Reproductive Rights was born — although they didn't finalize the name until a coffee-shop confab, when they also created an Instagram profile. Their first event was a May 7 march in Nashville Public Square Park for abortion rights; their second, a music concert in late July that raised $5,000 for Abortion Care Tennessee.

At that point, the girls started to rethink what they might accomplish. The foursome had initially thought the group was "a one-time thing," Lily said, "but then we started hanging out and getting to know each other." Soon, their minds turned to sex education.

Alyson, who wants to become a lawyer, recalled the lessons she sat through: "It was just, like, 'Don't have sex,' [and] the guys goofed off the whole time." Emma Rose, who wants to major in English and political science, had similar memories: "In fifth grade, they just said your boobs might grow and you might get your period. … In ninth-grade, they showed pictures of STDs [and] said this is what you're going to get if you have sex." Paige remembered the teacher letting the boys go to the playground while the girls learned about periods. And Lily, an Irish history buff, said what stuck out most was that her sex-ed teachers clearly didn't want to answer any questions.

That fits with Tennessee law, where sex education cannot include instruction that encourages students to engage in "non-abstinent behavior," and teachers could face a $500 fine if they fail to comply.

The four teens began to wonder: Could we do better?

The two-hour picnic on a superhot Saturday afternoon this month attended by about 30 students — mostly girls but a handful of boys, too — was a trial run. The girls spoke briefly about issues they want to cover more later, including the implications of new state antiabortion laws. But a lot of the conversation was loose, just teens talking.

“It’s like you’re going back in time,” one girl said of *Roe*’s end.

“I think my concern is bringing more kids into this world,” said another. “The foster-care system is terrible.”

A boy recounted a recent chat with his devoutly Christian mother and shared advice for approaching antiabortion family members: “It can be scary. But it’s definitely worth talking with people about.”

Much of the afternoon had the vibe of a hangout, with boxes of pizza and gentle music. The teens played games of Ninja and Zap. A boy who rode up on a bike, training for his high school cycling team, offered to wear a Teens for Reproductive Rights sticker on his racing helmet.

As the clock inched to 5 p.m., Alyson sought everyone’s attention one more time. She had homework to assign.

“There’s a documentary on Netflix,” she said, raising her voice. “It’s called ‘Reversing Roe.’ It talks about, literally from early 1900s to recent — I think it came out right before the actual reversing.” She added that the film traces how abortion “became politicized, which it wasn’t originally at all.”

Teens sprawled on blankets bent their heads over phones and pamphlets to take down the name.

Valerie Strauss contributed to this report.