

WHAT SHE SAID

Why does medically accurate sex education matter? Look at the abortion debate

By [Stephanie Ebbert](#) Globe Staff, May 21, 2019, 6:52 p.m.



Jane Marcus of Medford chanted during a rally outside of the State House on Tuesday held to protest restrictive abortion laws recently passed in several states. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

For years advocates have been pushing Beacon Hill to require that sex education in

Massachusetts classrooms be medically accurate. Their effort just got an unlikely boost from the [legislative chambers of Alabama, Missouri, and Ohio](#).

As those states enacted [strict new limits on abortion](#), lawmakers acknowledged ignorance about the finer points of reproduction, even as they displayed utter confidence in their ability to regulate it.

An Alabama senator pushing a ban on abortion said the procedure would still be available to women before they know they are pregnant.

Missouri Representative Barry Hovis said his state's ban on abortions after eight weeks' gestation would leave "ample time in those eight weeks" for women to make a decision on abortion, revealing a gross misunderstanding of how pregnancy is calculated in the real world.

And an Ohio state representative called for reimplanting rather than aborting ectopic pregnancies — when a fertilized egg implants itself outside the uterus — a wishful-thinking procedure that doesn't actually exist.

Massachusetts state Representative Paul Brodeur called the uninformed commentary "jaw-dropping."

"Their misunderstandings are so fundamental," Brodeur said. "I must admit, I wonder whether or not it is ignorance or willful intent to try to sensationalize the issue."

Brodeur, a Melrose Democrat, has thought a lot about this as a lead sponsor of legislation that would establish standards for sex education in Massachusetts. Sex ed is not currently mandatory in the state, and individual schools can teach any version they want.

The "Healthy Youth" bill would still not require all schools to teach sex ed; it would merely compel schools that teach it to use medically accurate information. It would

also call for those programs to cover sexual consent, which does not seem like a radical idea a year and a half into the #MeToo movement.

But the bill — which he’s been pushing since 2011 — still hasn’t gotten any traction in the House. Suffice it to say, Speaker Robert DeLeo has not been a champion of the sex ed bill, which he let die a quiet death four legislative sessions in a row.

Ironically, this year reproductive rights advocates began their annual lobbying for the bill at a January event where they recognized DeLeo for his leadership on reproductive rights.

Asked whether he will push the bill in the current climate, DeLeo’s spokeswoman said, “The House looks forward to the Education Committee’s recommendations once the public hearing and review process is complete.”

The Senate did pass a version of the bill last year, after a legislative committee tried to excise the language requiring that sex ed cover consent and sexual orientation.

That’s right, some legislators in Massachusetts — the first state in the nation to allow gay marriage (2004) and the first state to ratify transgender rights in a statewide referendum (2018) — still don’t want to acknowledge homosexual sex in public school classrooms.

Or heterosexual sex, for that matter.

Or sexually transmitted infections, which are soaring in Massachusetts.

We’re so uncomfortable talking about sex with our children — not just here, but across the country — that we cede the conversation to men who have no idea what they’re talking about.

“I’m not trained medically, so I don’t know the proper medical terminology and timelines,” [Alabama state Senator Clyde Chambliss was quoted as saying about his](#)

[bill](#). “But from what I’ve read, what I’ve been told, there’s some period of time before you can know a woman is pregnant. . . . It takes some time for all those chromosomes and all that.”

As a quick remedial review: Yes, there is time before a woman who had sex becomes pregnant, and there is more time before she can confirm that pregnancy.

Pregnancy is calculated by the date of a woman’s last period, which means that by the time a woman misses a period, she is already at least four weeks pregnant. For women who don’t have regular 28-day cycles, a late period will not immediately trigger a warning signal. Some don’t learn they are pregnant until closer to the six-week mark — right when states like Ohio and Georgia are banning abortion, based on the ability to detect a heartbeat.

That’s why so many women have been warning that banning abortion after six weeks is effectively banning it outright. And why Hovis, in Missouri, was wrong to say that an eight-week ban gives women eight weeks to make a decision on a pregnancy. (Maybe four.)

But facts do not seem to matter to some of these proponents. Ohio state Representative John Becker [has doubled down on his false claims](#) that an ectopic pregnancy can be reimplemented safely in the uterus.

That would be lovely, if true. [It would also be news to ob-gyns](#), who have said there is no such treatment, that ectopic pregnancies do not survive, and that they put the mother [at risk of a fallopian rupture or bleeding to death](#). Becker’s bill, at least, would still allow an abortion to save the life of the mother — provided you believe the doctor’s prognosis.

Denial is powerful, though. And those in power are apt to legislate based on it.

Seven years ago, then-congressman Todd Akin of Missouri made his false assertion

that women couldn't get pregnant from rape. "If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down," he famously said.

Fast forward to May 2019, when Hovis, on the floor of the Missouri House, characterized the vast majority of rapes as date rape or "consensual rape."

In Massachusetts, sex education proponents like Brodeur would like to shut that confusion down with some clear-cut, medically accurate lessons on reproduction.

"At some point, you wonder: Do they need sex ed? Should we start in the Legislature?" Brodeur said. "Talk about being a poster child for the need."

"What She Said" is an occasional column on gender issues. Stephanie Ebbert can be reached at Stephanie.Ebbert@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@StephanieEbbert](https://twitter.com/StephanieEbbert).

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