

The Course of True Love

Marriage in High School Textbooks

Executive Summary

What are U.S. high schools teaching the younger generation about marriage? Based on a careful review of leading high school health textbooks, the answer is partly reassuring and partly disturbing. These textbooks are considerably more accurate, balanced, and useful than current college-level textbooks on marriage and the family. Yet these high school books are much worse than they ought to be.

In 1997, the Council on Families released *Closed Hearts, Closed Minds: The Textbook Story of Marriage*, a report examining college-level marriage and family life textbooks. That report concluded that “what these students are being taught by these textbooks is probably doing them more harm than good.” This report examines how the nation’s leading high school textbooks present the topics of marriage, sexuality, and family life.

The six textbooks cited in this study — all high school health textbooks published between 1993 and 1997 — include all of the health textbooks that are currently used in the 20 U.S. states that adopt specific health textbooks at the state level. Moreover, since major textbook publishers are naturally responsive to the criteria developed by the 20 adoption states, the textbooks currently used by the other 30 states are likely to be the same as, or quite similar to, the textbooks examined in this study.

Regarding these textbooks, there is good news and bad news.

The good news is that high school textbooks generally treat marriage respectfully. They present marriage as an important personal commitment. They recommend sexual abstinence for teenagers. They present detailed information about the health risks and potentially harmful consequences of early sexual activity. They directly acknowledge at least the short-term emotional and economic difficulties of divorce and of single parenting. They seek to discourage both teenage marriage and teenage child-bearing, emphasizing that marriage and parenthood require maturity.

Especially regarding the importance of marriage, these high school textbooks stand out in marked contrast to college-level texts. The high school texts typically and conscientiously seek to reflect both community values — the basic perspectives shared by the parents and the neighbors of the students who use the books — as well as the recent conclusions of many leading family scholars. Family is important. Marriage matters. All things being equal, children are better off when they grow up with their two, married parents.

The bad news is that these high school textbooks are intellectually weak and often poorly informed. They are sometimes marred by factual errors. They often ignore or distort important bodies of research about why marriage matters and what makes marriages successful. When advising students on how to cope with divorce, they at times substitute wishful thinking for

accurate information and neglect the topic of adult responsibility.

Most importantly, they almost completely bypass the opportunity to acquaint students with rich treasure troves of knowledge about love, courtship, marriage, and family life that are readily available from art and literature and from disciplines such as history, anthropology, philosophy, and theology. By systematically depriving students of intellectual oxygen, these books ultimately present an understanding of marriage that is thin, one-dimensional, and boring.

Trapped within the restrictive confines of a “health” paradigm, with its related psycho-therapeutic emphasis on individual self-actualization, these textbooks seldom even attempt to convey any broader understanding of marriage as a complex institution with many dimensions, including natural, legal, moral-religious, economic, and social. As a result, these books simply cannot address the core questions confronting today’s teenagers.

In an increasingly atomized society, what does family commitment look like? Is there any deeper meaning to our sexual drive and how does it relate to our desire for trust and love? What makes for a lasting, satisfying marriage? How might marriage and family life be connected to one’s larger sense of purpose in life? These are by far the hardest, most interesting, and most important issues. Yet these books largely ignore them.

The story of marriage and family life contained in these textbooks is not so much wrong — these students will have to wait until they read their college textbooks for *that* — as it is empty: intellectually, emotionally, and morally vacuous. Many of today’s teenagers, themselves children of the divorce revolution, are uncertain and even anxious about their own chances of

achieving a loving marriage. Many of them are eager to avoid the family chaos that characterized so much of their parents’ generation.¹ As they struggle with this challenge — as they struggle in a sense to beat the odds that they have inherited — these textbooks probably won’t hurt them. But neither will they help them. We adults can do better for these children.

Finally, these textbooks provide fascinating insights into the overall state of our society, a window through which we can glimpse the current fault lines of the broader cultural debate. On one side, these books clearly expose our often excessive reliance on health, self-actualization, and self-esteem as the main categories for understanding life. In turn, this one-dimensional vocabulary surely reflects a deeper ambivalence as to how, or even whether, in our pluralistic society, we might properly speak to one another in directly communal and moral terms about sexuality, marriage, and family life.

Yet on the other side, these books often reveal sincere efforts to pass on basic values such as teenage sexual abstinence and the importance of commitment in marriage. Many adults today, including many educators, are deeply concerned about deteriorating social morality and, in particular, about the character and values exhibited by young people today.² These books reflect that concern. Even as they are weighed down and cramped in by the clumsy paradigm of “health,” with only a limited number of mostly psychological and therapeutic concepts at their disposal, these high school books nonetheless reveal an implicitly moral language struggling to get out, and to speak to children in its own name. This is good news. Perhaps it is even a harbinger of cultural renewal. Surely it is a foundation on which future high school textbooks can build.

About this Report

This report was commissioned by the Council on Families, a project of the Institute for American Values, and written by Paul C. Vitz of New York University.

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