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# Eugenics, Sex and Family Life Education, and Juvenile Delinquency in Los Angeles County, California

Julia B. Haager 

College of Arts and Sciences, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC, USA  
Email: [jhaager@wcu.edu](mailto:jhaager@wcu.edu)

## Abstract

This glimpse into sex education in the Los Angeles region illustrates the eugenic ideas about racially “fit” reproduction that emerged in family life curricula during the Second World War. Ideas about eugenic reproduction in public schools responded to broader cultural fears about increasing divorce rates, criminality, immigration, and birthright citizenship. Eugenics in sex and family life education, importantly, portrayed a woman’s choice of mate as a civic responsibility, a move that paved the way for future conflicts about teaching gender and sexuality in public school sex education. Amid a half-century-long conflict over abstinence-only versus comprehensive sex education in public schools, topics like genetics and heredity have come to be widely accepted by both sides—recognized as a presumably value-neutral staple of sex education in US public schools. Yet recent innovations in genetic and reproductive technologies, as well as the conflict over trans and queer youth in the United States, challenge the assumption that teaching genetics and heredity in public schools really is “value neutral.”

**Keywords:** sex education and eugenics; genetics, heredity, and sex education; sex education and juvenile delinquency; sex and family life education

“In Los Angeles County there is a divorce for every marriage,” exaggerated Los Angeles Board of Education (BOE) member Mrs. Eleanor B. Allen in 1946.<sup>1</sup> Allen reported on an alarming increase in divorce and juvenile delinquency at a citywide panel about truancy. She hoped attendees would agree to reinstitute the city’s truancy detail to crack down on absentee children and neglectful parents. Two out of five marriages in the United States ended in divorce, Allen elaborated; however, three out of five marriages

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<sup>1</sup>Emphasis in the original. “Notes for Mrs. Eleanor B. Allen, to be used as a part of a Panel discussion November 14, 1946, John Burroughs Jr. High School,” folder 1, box 894, Los Angeles Unified School District Records, University of California, Los Angeles Special Collections, Los Angeles, CA (hereafter UCLA-LAUSD Records).

in California had the same result. Poor parenting and juvenile delinquency were at the heart of this distressing problem, she insisted:

The adults of this community should extract their heads and torsos from the sands of apathy and look at the light of day! ... This appalling condition is the result of lowered standards of morals among adults; negative and destructive behavior and examples set by adults. This has given rise to promiscuous behavior, increased thievery, burglary hold-ups and even murder. Parents and all other respectable adults in the community should inform themselves as to the real conditions in this city.<sup>2</sup>

Allen's attack on parents was in no way new during the postwar period—advocates had used parental failings to justify school reforms and sex education programs since the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> It is also not clear if rates of divorce and juvenile delinquency were actually rising in California during and after World War II. But parents certainly perceived them to be, and reports like Allen's were alarming.<sup>4</sup> The connection Allen drew between the behaviors parents exhibited and rising rates of

<sup>2</sup>“Notes for Mrs. Eleanor B. Allen,” folder 1, box 894, UCLA-LAUSD Records.

<sup>3</sup>Jeffrey P. Moran, *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 23–67; Leigh Ann Wheeler, *Against Obscenity: Reform and the Politics of Womanhood in America, 1873-1935* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 96–115; Kristy L. Slominski, *Teaching Moral Sex: A History of Religion and Sex Education in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 19–66; Lauren Bialystok and Lisa M. F. Andersen, *Touchy Subject: The History and Philosophy of Sex Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 19 and 37; Jonathan Zimmerman, *Too Hot to Handle: A Global History of Sex Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 14 and 33; Ellen S. More, *The Transformation of American Sex Education: Mary Calderone and the Fight for Sexual Health* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 22.

<sup>4</sup>Although it is very difficult to assess whether the rates of divorce and juvenile delinquency were really on the rise at this time, in this article what matters most is that people *thought* that these rates were rising and made decisions based on that perception. There is evidence that divorce rates may not have been rising as dramatically as people thought and that juvenile delinquency rates were not necessarily on the rise, although in both cases the data are flawed. Rebecca L. Davis, for example, found broken homes may have been on the rise during the Great Depression and WWII, while legal divorce itself declined. Studies on the cause of divorce in California at the time, such as those conducted by Lewis Terman at Stanford, were undecided about whether divorce was on the rise and whether WWII was really causing more divorces. See Eliza K. Pavalko and Glen H. Elder Jr., “World War II and Divorce: A Life-Course Perspective,” *American Journal of Sociology* 95, no. 4 (March 1990), 1213–34; and Rebecca L. Davis, *More Perfect Unions: The American Search for Marital Bliss* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 68–69. In contrast, Miroslava Chávez-García suggests that high rates of incarceration for juvenile crimes were a reality in Los Angeles County. In California, Progressive Era approaches to scientific research had a profound effect on Mexican, Mexican American, and African American youth, ensuring they were disproportionately incarcerated as “feeble-minded and criminally minded offenders whose genetic or racial stock was the root cause of their deficiencies” throughout the twentieth century. See Miroslava Chávez-García, *States of Delinquency: Race and Science in the Making of California's Juvenile Justice System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 4. Nationwide, as Ann Marie Kordas argues, rates of juvenile delinquency were due to increased attention, which meant youths' crimes were more likely to have been recorded. See Anne Marie Kordas, *The Politics of Childhood in Cold War America* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2015), 135–36. Sarah Igo also makes clear in *The Averaged American* that much of the statistical data collected throughout the mid-twentieth century sought to characterize the “average” by measuring outliers, such as juvenile delinquency, to define the “average.” This has resulted in a host of problems related to survey participation, datasets, and analysis. Sarah Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

divorce and juvenile delinquency had a eugenic spin during and after the Second World War. To Allen, truancy was a two-pronged problem because behaviors like promiscuity and criminality that led to truancy were determined by heredity and environmental changes brought about by WWII.<sup>5</sup>

The teaching of eugenics—an ideology advocating for the control of human heredity to improve society—through sex education became a key part of how schools addressed behavioral problems like truancy and juvenile delinquency during WWII. Eugenics also led to the introduction of family life topics in sex education, promising that good heredity would promote stable marriages and improve the era's social problems, including the troubling rates of divorce, juvenile delinquency, and truancy, which had appalled Allen.<sup>6</sup> However, defining eugenics during this period is and was challenging, because school officials, parents, and teachers like Allen who disseminated eugenic information through sex education were not always committed to a single version of eugenics (and, in some cases, may not have been very aware that the arguments they were making derived from eugenic theories). In short, there was no single formulation of eugenic theory that people espoused as a part of sex education at this time. Yet there was a shared commitment to teaching that genetic inheritance and selective reproduction would improve society—the foundational framework of eugenics. *Positive eugenics* and *negative eugenics* were terms used to connote two different approaches to carrying out eugenic theory. *Positive eugenics* encouraged increasing “fit” or good heredity to improve society, whereas *negative eugenics* sought to restrict “unfit” or bad heredity, often through invasive and highly restrictive means such as forced sterilization or incarceration.<sup>7</sup> Although proponents of these theories of eugenics understood them as different approaches, both were rooted in racism, sexism, classism, and ableism and ultimately harmed the individuals who were subjected to the ideas and policies that emerged from their implementation. Since few advocates of eugenic sex education subscribed to a single definition of eugenic theories, the line between these approaches often blurred in public school sex education.

Yet the link between negative eugenics and juvenile delinquency in California was well established by the time of Allen's remarks. In the 1890s, Californians began building a system of juvenile justice institutions and reformatory schools in Southern

<sup>5</sup>“Notes for Mrs. Eleanor B. Allen,” folder 1, box 894, UCLA-LAUSD Records.

<sup>6</sup>For a discussion of the wider eugenic landscape and marriage at the time, see Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 124–57.

<sup>7</sup>For a longer discussion of positive versus negative eugenic approaches during this time, see Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 272; Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 16 and 129–48; Johanna Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Rebecca M. Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America, 1950–1980* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 10; 20; Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 173–205; Alexandra Minna Stern, *Telling Genes: A Story of Genetic Counseling in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 3–4; Ariela J. Gross, *What Blood Won't Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 253–92; Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 205–45.

California to house “delinquent and dependent youths” and control their reproduction through forced sterilization or indefinite incarceration, or both. This meant that young people who were convicted of a crime or deemed to eventually become unfit parents were often incarcerated and/or forcibly sterilized at state-run institutions for juvenile delinquents. And a majority of those incarcerated and/or sterilized were Mexican, Mexican American, or African American adolescents who were thought to have absentee or inadequate parents (markers of supposedly bad heredity).<sup>8</sup> Historian Miroslava Chávez-García chronicles the development of these state institutions in California and the administrators who were selected to head the reformatories, most of whom advocated for negative eugenics. From 1912 to 1927, for example, Fred C. Nelles, a well-known advocate of progressive educational ideas, drew from eugenics and race science theories to overhaul the Whittier State School and “truly reform” the incarcerated youth in his charge. Nelles also selected the heads of numerous reform schools in California because they were likeminded eugenicists; these eugenics-inspired school administrators sought to “Americanize” the predominantly Mexican American and African American youth deemed delinquent and to “help them along the right road.”<sup>9</sup> The eugenic principles Nelles promoted when carrying out this work permeated schools in Los Angeles and garnered significant state and national attention, especially as other states expanded their juvenile justice systems and promoted negative eugenics in public schools.

But during WWII, fears that non-White youth were gathering with White youth in public spaces and corrupting the supposedly superior genetic stock of White youth abounded. And, as this article explains, school curricula emphasized positive eugenics (or “better breeding” strategies for those with “good” heredity to encourage and increase their “fit” reproduction). To school administrators, parents, and teachers, inserting positive eugenic ideas into the sex ed curricula became a way to curtail the possibility of interracial sexual relationships that eugenicists thought would degrade the supposedly superior racial stock of White students. To be clear, this happened at the same time that racialist interpretations of eugenics sought to forcibly restrict the supposedly inferior stock of non-White youth deemed delinquent, so there were moments where advocates promoted both approaches. Put differently, racism as well as positive and negative eugenic theories coexisted in Los Angeles public schools. In fact, these theories so aggressively drove policy regarding delinquency that they were met with some criticism. The *Los Angeles Times* even proclaimed in 1942 that “Delinquency Cases Rise 700 Per Cent,” in an article detailing how the policing and incarceration (and likely sterilization) of purportedly delinquent non-White youth taxed state and local resources.<sup>10</sup> BOE member Allen’s concern about cuts to the Los Angeles schools’ truancy detail in 1946 emerged in a climate characterized by eugenics-based concerns that interracial reproduction would exacerbate social problems such as divorce, criminality,

<sup>8</sup> Chávez-García, *States of Delinquency*, 48–78.

<sup>9</sup> Chávez-García, *States of Delinquency*, 49–50.

<sup>10</sup> “Delinquency Cases Rise 700 Per Cent,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 1943, 13.

alcoholism, “feble-mindedness,” and poor parenting.<sup>11</sup> Including positive eugenics-inspired topics in sex education became yet another way (besides incarceration) to try to prevent young people from engaging in interracial sexual relationships.

Parents’ and school administrators’ concerns about interracial relationships and juvenile delinquency increased during WWII, especially in light of the recent series of deportation raids in the 1930s that had targeted Mexican, Chinese, and Japanese immigrants. Local, state, and national newspapers also sensationalized incidents like the “Sleepy Lagoon” murder and “Zoot Suit Riots” in the early 1940s.<sup>12</sup> And to justify deporting Mexican-born citizens and American-born people of Mexican descent in the 1930s, eugenicists characterized Mexicans as “oversexed hyper breeders,” leading eugenics- and social Darwinist-inspired ideas like White “race suicide” to circulate in popular culture and draw peoples’ attention to young people’s reproduction.<sup>13</sup>

Racial tensions ran especially high in Los Angeles after the December 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor, and the violence that resulted also placed juvenile delinquency and its purportedly eugenic cause front and center. The Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Office, for example, instituted a dragnet that targeted male and female Mexican American teens by August of 1942, claiming they were “biologically inclined toward violence and criminal behavior” and likely to reproduce at higher rates than their White peers.<sup>14</sup> Reports from the increased policing efforts connected juvenile delinquency—and particularly sex delinquency, which was the female-specific diagnosis defined by excessive sexual desire—to genetic, biological differences and the potential for interracial reproduction and White “race suicide.” All of this happened in part because the larger youth culture that emerged in Los Angeles during WWII provided ample opportunities for young people from different racial backgrounds to interact. As historian Elizabeth Escobedo has argued, dance halls and other Los Angeles leisure spaces encouraged cross-cultural encounters, enabling “Mexican Americans to at once negotiate and transform ideas about race and sexuality in ways unimaginable in the pre-World War II era.”<sup>15</sup> As this article discusses, parents, teachers, and school administrators responded

<sup>11</sup>Gordon, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right*, 272; Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 16 and 129–48; Schoen, *Choice and Coercion*; Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied*, 10; 20; Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 173–205; Stern, *Telling Genes*, 3–4; Gross, *What Blood Won’t Tell*, 253–92; Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 205–45.

<sup>12</sup>For a concise summary of xenophobia as it relates to eugenics, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles during the 1930s, see Erika Lee, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 147–49 and 157–58. For a brief overview of the Sleepy Lagoon murder and Zoot Suit Riots, see Roger Bruns, *Zoot Suit Riots* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2014); Eduardo Obregón Pagan, *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Catherine S. Ramírez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Luis Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during WWII* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Zevi Gutfreund, *Speaking American: Language Education and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019); Laura L. Cummings, *Pachucas and Pachucos in Tucson: Situated Border Lives* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009); and Elizabeth R. Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Home Front* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup>Lee, *America for Americans*, 174–75.

<sup>14</sup>Bruns, *Zoot Suits*, xiii.

<sup>15</sup>Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits*, 103–4.

to these developments in youth culture by searching for more proactive ways to prevent interracial relationships. Debates about parental failings and juvenile delinquency like those at Allen's 1946 truancy meeting began to include eugenics-based sex education as a solution to these problems.

Ahead of the rest of the nation, and because of the leadership of eugenicists-turned-marriage experts in the 1930s, California schools had rebranded sex education, titling it education for "family living" and embedding discussions of puberty, reproduction, parenthood, and marriage in home economics, physical and health education, and vocational education programs.<sup>16</sup> By the start of WWII, sex education in California public schools focused on eugenics as a way of preventing broken homes, which many thought resulted in juvenile delinquency and an increased the risk of interracial procreative relationships. The state also housed two of the nation's first marriage counseling centers, the American Institute of Family Relations (AIFR) and the San Francisco Family Relations Center (SFFRC), led by the longtime eugenicists and sex educators Paul Popenoe and Henry M. Grant. These pioneering marriage centers provided premarital counseling and sex education coursework, as well as professional conferences and eugenic curricula to school administrators, teachers, social workers, nurses, parents, religious leaders, and community members who were ready and eager to solve social problems.<sup>17</sup> In this context—where poor parenting was seen as the result of hereditary "deficiencies" and where Los Angeles youth culture might encourage interracial sexual relationships that were thought to lead to hereditary "deficiencies"—proponents of eugenic sex education curricula saw eugenic strategies as a logical preventative measure. This article explores the imprecise but ever-present eugenic ideas that shaped sex and family life education programs designed to prevent juvenile delinquency and promote the ideal of the White, heterosexual American nuclear family in Los Angeles County.

The historical scholarship on sex education during and after WWII downplays the continued role of eugenics, genetics, and heredity as educators popularized family life topics like marriage, parenting, and citizenship.<sup>18</sup> Scholars like historian Alexandra M. Lord have examined federal interventions in sex education, describing the incorporation of family life topics as a response to a perceived increase in divorce rates and the

<sup>16</sup>For a longer discussion of the Great Depression and early introduction of family life topics in California, see Julia B. Haager, "Chapter 4: Family Relations and Sex Education in California, 1930-1940," in *Teaching Responsible Reproduction: Eugenics and Sex Education in the United States from the Progressive Era through World War II* (PhD diss., SUNY Binghamton, 2022), 167-225; and Slominski, *Teaching Moral Sex*, 123-68. For a broader discussion of sex education during WWII, see Alexandra M. Lord, *Condom Nation: The U.S. Government's Sex Education Campaign from WWI to the Internet* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 71-114, esp. 90-96; and Susan K. Freeman, *Sex Goes to School: Girls and Sex Education before the 1960s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 100-124. For a discussion of marriage, motherhood, and divorce rates during WWII, see Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Christina Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern: Women's Sexuality From the Progressive Era to World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 138-217; and Rebecca L. Davis, *More Perfect Unions: The American Search for Marital Bliss* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 176-213.

<sup>17</sup>Haager, "Chapter 4: Family Relations and Sex Education in California, 1930-1940," 167-225.

<sup>18</sup>Moran, *Teaching Sex*, 118-56; Freeman, *Sex Goes to School*, 100-124; Lord, *Condom Nation*, 90-96.

breakdown of the White, heterosexual American nuclear family.<sup>19</sup> Others, such as historians Susan K. Freeman and Jeffrey P. Moran, have focused on the gendered nature of public schooling, arguing that family life topics emerged alongside other curricular developments that were part of patriotic wartime preparations.<sup>20</sup> Scholarship focused on California in the immediate postwar period, from scholars like Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, has emphasized how family life-sex education became a political strategy amid Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union in the 1950s.<sup>21</sup> This article builds on all of this scholarship by examining how and *why* eugenic ideas did not disappear in public schools when family life topics were added to sex education programs. It argues that eugenics remained an important part of sex and family life education, even though the eugenic topics were discussed in an imprecise and rhetorically less overt manner, and were ideologically more focused on promoting “good heredity” through better breeding than restricting “bad heredity” through incarceration or sterilization.

In the 1940s many people disavowed the formal science of eugenics—especially negative eugenic programs that aimed to restrict reproduction—in response to public denunciations of the Holocaust and anthropological critiques of racial inheritance and sex roles (from social scientists like Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, and Erik Erikson).<sup>22</sup> Academia and formal eugenic organizations like the American Eugenics Society even experienced a mass exodus in the 1930s and 1940s; the AES was almost defunct by 1940 and other eugenic organizations focused on negative pathways to restricting reproduction, such as the Human Betterment Foundation, folded in the 1940s.<sup>23</sup> But eugenic “better breeding” ideology remained alive and well during and after WWII, especially as several prominent eugenicists, like Paul Popenoe, who had been involved in the AES and academic circles, moved to California and rebranded themselves as marriage

<sup>19</sup> Lord, *Condom Nation*, 71–114, esp. 90–96.

<sup>20</sup> Freeman, *Sex Goes to School*, 16; and Moran, *Teaching Sex*, 140–41.

<sup>21</sup> Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, *Classroom Wars: Language, Sex, and the Making of Modern Political Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 105–57.

<sup>22</sup> Alexandra Lord is the only scholar of sex education who directly addresses the eugenics movement and family life-sex education in the 1940s, although her focus is on the federal government’s military efforts in sex education, not on US public schools. To Lord, the Holocaust marks a moment when eugenicists shifted from negative eugenics (sterilization and controlling the fertility of less desirable people) toward positive eugenics (encouraging the more desirable to reproduce). Lord does not discuss how this shift in emphasis shaped family life-sex education in public schools. See Lord, *Condom Nation*, 98. For historians who argued that in the US eugenics was in decline in the 1930s because of the Holocaust and new anthropological critiques of racial inheritance, see Mark Haller, *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 179; Carl Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 150–53; Gordon, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right*, 272; Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 16 and 129–48; and Edwin Black, *War against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race* (Washington, DC: Dialog Press, 2012), 385–411, esp. 395.

<sup>23</sup> Historian Rebecca L. Davis describes how Paul Popenoe strategically distanced himself and the AIFR from the eugenics movement during the postwar period, avoiding the word *eugenics* in favor of *heredity* after the California Supreme Court’s 1948 *Perez v. Sharp* decision to overturn a ban on interracial marriage. See Davis, *More Perfect Unions*, 123–24; and Aaron Gillette, *Eugenics and the Nature-Nurture Debate in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 142–47.

experts to weigh in on family life-sex education curricula.<sup>24</sup> As scholars of forced sterilization, birth control, and abortion have argued, imprecisely discussed but important aspects of eugenic ideology—especially about the heritability of certain character traits and about the social impact of genetics and reproduction—persisted and evolved amid WWII-era concerns about marriage, divorce, juvenile delinquency, immigration, and citizenship.<sup>25</sup> Rather than discourage eugenically “unfit” young people from reproducing, eugenic sex education during WWII sought to encourage students to avoid interracial procreation and consider their own heredity and genetics when choosing a mate to marry.

As this glimpse into sex and family life education in the Los Angeles region illustrates, the eugenic ideas about racially “fit” reproduction that emerged in family life curricula during the Second World War responded to broader cultural fears about increasing divorce rates, criminality, immigration, and birthright citizenship. This version of eugenics in family life-sex education importantly portrayed a woman’s choice of mate a civic responsibility, a move that paved the way for future conflicts about teaching gender and sexuality in public school sex education. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, expressions of gender, sexual orientation, and heteronormativity have taken center stage in political fights between conservatives and liberals. Recent debates about the purpose of public school sex education have aimed to reinforce binary gender conventions and the White, heterosexual American nuclear family. Amid a decades-long conflict over abstinence-only versus comprehensive sex education, topics like genetics and heredity have come to be widely accepted by both sides—as a presumably value-neutral staple of sex education in US public schools. Yet recent innovations in genetics and reproductive technologies (e.g., in vitro fertilization, genetic testing, CRISPR DNA editing, gene therapies, epigenetics), as well as the visibility of queer youth and families in the United States, challenge the assumption that teaching genetics really is “value neutral.” Why did we come to see these topics as value neutral? This article reveals that teaching genetics and heredity is not only deeply rooted in the eugenics movement but also may yet be another way to reinforce the White, American nuclear family as a civic ideal.<sup>26</sup> Amid today’s accusations of teachers “grooming” children, homophobic and transphobic slurs that conflate biological sex with gender, fears about critical race theory in public schools, and new genetic editing

<sup>24</sup>Haager, “Chapter 4: Family Relations and Sex Education in California, 1930-1940,” 167–225.

<sup>25</sup>See Schoen, *Choice and Coercion*; Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied*, 10, 20; Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 173–205; and Stern, *Telling Genes*, 3–4. Some scholars have adopted an alternate terminology (for instance, Kluchin uses the terms *eugenics* and *neo-eugenics*), but I have chosen not to with regard to *eugenics* in the post-WWII period because my sources did not use such terminology—they either simply used the term *eugenics* or described reproduction using eugenic assumptions about heritability. My sources were very imprecise about which application of eugenic theory they were advocating for; they sometimes conflated positive and negative eugenics, so it made little sense to use an alternative designation, especially when they would not have recognized one. Adding a new term would have been adding imprecision to what was already an ideologically imprecise situation.

<sup>26</sup>To be clear, medical professionals do not view genetics as value neutral and devoid of complications with respect to biomedical ethics. For a discussion of these political debates between conservatives and liberals, see Janice Irvine, *Talk about Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and *Talk about Sex: How Sex Ed Battles Helped Ignite the Right* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2023).



technologies aiming to provide parents with more reproductive choices to those who can afford them, this discussion of the eugenic origins of sex education helps us rethink what we want the purpose of genetics and heredity in sex education to be moving forward.<sup>27</sup>

### Education for Citizenship and Democracy during WWII

Schools across the United States responded to the country's entry into the Second World War by emphasizing citizenship and democracy in the school curriculum.<sup>28</sup> Sex education in Los Angeles was not exempt from these wartime reforms. At the start of the fall semester in 1942, Esther H. Walker, president of the Los Angeles Tenth District Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) wrote inquisitively to members of the Los Angeles Board of Education (BOE) asking if "sex education is to be stressed" in the wartime curricula.<sup>29</sup> Walker's letter prioritized expanding the curricula amid a larger push to prepare for wartime disruptions. Tenth District PTA members also petitioned the superintendent and BOE to explore eugenic topics in family life-sex education. Correspondence between PTA President Walker and C. L. Craig, assistant secretary of the BOE, described such revisions to the curriculum as vital to "gearing instruction

<sup>27</sup>In recent years, numerous conservative states have initiated "Parental Rights in Education" laws (aka "Don't Say Gay" laws) to prohibit discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity in public school classrooms. For a brief history of how these fit into the larger context of sex education and LGBTQ history, see Omar G. Encarnación, "Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' Bill Is Part of the State's Long, Shameful History," *Time*, May 12, 2022, <https://time.com/6176224/florida-dont-say-gay-history-lgbtq-rights>. Most recently, Florida expanded its "Don't Say Gay" law to all school grades, and several states are currently discussing similar bills, including Arizona, Indiana, Kansas, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Kentucky. For some of the coverage on these, see Anthony Izaguirre and Brendan Farrington, "Florida Expands 'Don't Say Gay'; House Oks Anti-LGBTQ Bills," Associated Press, April 19, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/desantis-florida-dont-say-gay-ban-684ed25a303f83208a89c556543183cb>; Neal Broverman, "Don't Say Gay Bill Signed in Iowa; GOP Gov. Ok's Ratting on Trans Students," *Advocate*, May 26, 2023, <https://www.advocate.com/dont-say-gay/don-t-say-gay-law-signed-in-iowa>; Dan Godwin and Alex Boyer, "Texas Senate Advances Strict 'Don't Say Gay' Bill," *Fox4 News*, May 23, 2023, <https://www.fox4news.com/news/texas-senate-expected-to-pass-strict-dont-say-gay-bill/>; and John Riley, "Kentucky 'Don't Say Gay' Law Disputed over a Single Word," *Metro Weekly*, June 12, 2023, <https://www.metroweekly.com/2023/06/kentucky-dont-say-gay-law-disputed-over-a-single-word/>. For a discussion of how parents now have more ethically complicated reproductive choices than ever, see Walter Isaacson, *The Code Breaker: Jennifer Doudna, Gene Editing, and the Future of the Human Race* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021), 477-82; Smriti Mallapaty, "China Focuses on Ethics to Deter Another 'CRISPR Babies' Scandal," *Nature*, April 27, 2022, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-01051-0>; and Katie Hunt, "How Human Gene Editing Is Moving On after the CRISPR Baby Scandal," *CNN*, March 9, 2023.

<sup>28</sup>In 1940, the National Education Association (NEA) and National Congress of Parents and Teachers (national PTA) campaigned heavily for citizenship education, encouraging schools across the United States to teach about the merits of democracy and civic responsibilities. See G. L. Maxwell, "Citizens in the Making," *National Parent-Teacher* (June-July 1940): 27-30, in Box 118, Folder 3, Paul Popenoe Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming (hereafter AHC-Popenoe Papers); and Virginia, Klehns, National Congress of Parents and Teachers President, Chicago, Illinois, "The Child in His Community," in Box 118, Folder 3, AHC-Popenoe Papers.

<sup>29</sup>Mrs. Edward T. Walker, President Tenth District California Congress of Parents and Teachers, to Los Angeles BOE, September 23, 1942, Box 1163, Folder 4, UCLA-LAUSD Records.

to war needs.”<sup>30</sup> And Walker enclosed a sample curriculum from the California State Department of Education with her letter.

The model curriculum that Walker enclosed included a treatise about what eugenic sex education topics should be taught at each level of schooling as well as a corresponding bibliography. Authored by Dr. Ralph Eckert, a former school administrator and consultant in parent education for the California State Department of Education, the treatise made the overarching argument that sex education focused on heredity and “choice of mate” fostered civic responsibility in American youth. Eckert’s curriculum maintained the assumption that heritable conditions like delinquency and divorce threatened “the very stability of our society and its people” and thus should be prevented through better breeding strategies.<sup>31</sup> “Well-adjusted love,” he insisted, relied on a shared understanding that one’s “choice of mate” directly affected the nation because it could lead to social problems. According to Eckert’s curriculum, marriage was at its essence procreative and civic rather than sentimental; one’s choice of mate affected future generations because children inherited parents’ genetic dispositions *and* acquired US citizenship at birth. Eckert’s sex education materials described marriage and procreation in eugenic terms, as a foundational component of citizenship education that would help young people navigate wartime challenges. A week later, Craig replied to Walker, enthusiastically agreeing to the proposed collaboration between the PTA and Los Angeles City Schools.<sup>32</sup>

### Truancy and Juvenile Delinquency: Hereditary Problems, 1945-1946

At the November 1946 panel discussion on truancy where Mrs. Eleanor B. Allen pled with parents to “extract their heads and torsos from the sands of apathy,” she also reported that “broken homes contribute more to juvenile delinquency than any other factor.” The most common types of delinquency, she argued, included “truancy from school, running away from home, fighting, stealing, destroying property, sex delinquencies and burglary.”<sup>33</sup> The BOE’s goal at the panel was to convince attendees to vote in favor of re-establishing a “truancy detail,” a city-run police force responsible for detaining absentee and delinquent pupils in Los Angeles County. Historians like Judith Kafka have contextualized the postwar policing of student behavior as part of a larger and longer shift to target students of color and divest parents and teachers of the responsibility for disciplining young people.<sup>34</sup> The goals of Allen’s panel on truancy fit

<sup>30</sup>Mrs. Edward T. Walker, President Tenth District California Congress of Parents and Teachers, to Los Angeles BOE, September 23, 1942, Box 1163, Folder 4, UCLA-LAUSD Records; and C. L. Craig, Assistant Secretary, to Esther H. Walker, September 29, 1942, Box 1163, Folder 4, UCLA-LAUSD Records.

<sup>31</sup>Ralph Eckert curriculum enclosed in Mrs. Edward T. Walker, President Tenth District California Congress of Parents and Teachers, to Los Angeles BOE, September 23, 1942, Box 1163, Folder 4, UCLA-LAUSD Records; and C. L. Craig, Assistant Secretary, to Esther H. Walker, September 29, 1942, Box 1163, Folder 4, UCLA-LAUSD Records.

<sup>32</sup>C. L. Craig, Assistant Secretary, to Esther H. Walker, September 29, 1942, Box 1163, Folder 4, UCLA-LAUSD Records.

<sup>33</sup>“Notes for Mrs. Eleanor B. Allen,” folder 1, box 894, UCLA-LAUSD Records.

<sup>34</sup>Judith Kafka, *The History of “Zero Tolerance” in American Public Schooling* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7-8.

with this pattern—it aimed to not only increase surveillance of student behaviors but also focused on how students' poor behavior stemmed from parents' failure to corral young people.<sup>35</sup> It was also just a few short years after racial tensions from the aforementioned Sleepy Lagoon murder and Zoot Suit Riots drew peoples' attention to Los Angeles's interracial youth culture and truant-attracting leisure spaces.

Newspaper coverage of truancy during this time emphasized the supposed eugenic linkage between juvenile delinquency and heredity, targeting White girls as the most worrisome offenders. In March 1946, the Los Angeles *Daily News* printed a full-page feature article that warned about the high future costs of truancy and praised the well-coordinated efforts of the Los Angeles Truancy Detail, juvenile court, and school counselors that were teaching truants a lesson on the “folly” of their “hooky spree.”<sup>36</sup> The article explained the connection between truancy and juvenile delinquency that eugenicists understood as hereditary, noting: “The happy hooky player” who skips school to participate in leisure activities like shopping or going to the movies—interracial spaces that were a part of the fabric of Los Angeles's youth culture—“may become the habitual truant and subsequently the juvenile delinquent.”<sup>37</sup>

To Allen and readers of the *Daily News*, truancy was not only dangerous because it could promote interracial sexual activities in leisure spaces, but it was also evidence that even young people with a “good” genetic inheritance could have their stock corrupted by the act of engaging in criminal activities. As historian Karen Zipf explains, supporters of institutionalization for juvenile delinquents often blended eugenics with Social Darwinism to argue that “the purity of the white race” was at risk “of genetic mutation” when young people experienced “constant exposure to a bad social environment.”<sup>38</sup> School administrators and parents concerned about truancy implied that teens' exposure to interracial leisure spaces carried this same risk of genetic mutation.

Included in BOE member Allen's handwritten notes about the location where truants had been picked up on the streets of Los Angeles was the gendered argument that female juvenile delinquents were the most alarming offenders because they could be exposed to things that would lead to degrading their racial stock.<sup>39</sup> She estimated

<sup>35</sup> Allen's meeting took place a few short months after the truancy detail had been disbanded because of budget cuts.

<sup>36</sup> Gayle Gibbs, “Truants Given Lesson on Folly of ‘Hooky Spree,’” (*Los Angeles*) *Daily News*, March 21, 1946, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Gibbs, “Truants Given Lesson on Folly of ‘Hooky Spree,’” 3.

<sup>38</sup> Karen L. Zipf, *Bad Girls at Samarcand: Sexuality and Sterilization in a Southern Juvenile Reformatory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016), 85.

<sup>39</sup> Historians have written extensively about female juvenile delinquency during the decades preceding the WWII era, noting how girls were more likely to be interrogated for sexual histories, behaviors, and given unwanted gynecological examinations. See Steven Schlossman and Stephanie Wallach, “The Crime of Precocious Sexuality: Female Juvenile Delinquency in the Progressive Era,” *Harvard Educational Review* 48, no. 1 (Feb. 1978), 65-94; Mary E. Odem and Steven Schlossman, “Guardians of Virtue: The Juvenile Court and Female Delinquency in Early-Twentieth Century Los Angeles,” *Crime and Delinquency* 37, no. 2 (April 1991), 186-203; Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1890-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Ruth M. Alexander, “The Girl Problem”: *Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Estelle B. Freedman, *Maternal Justice: Miriam Van Waters and the Female Reform Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Anne Meis Knupfer, *Reform and Resistance: Gender, Delinquency and*

there were “more minority group girls picked up by truancy than ~~white~~ Anglo-Saxon, even though [the] latter out number [*sic*] others.” For boys, she scrawled, “it’s reverse.” Finally, “of absentees about 4% [are] illegal,” meaning they were kept out of school to work but did not have work permits.<sup>40</sup> Allen’s point here was that young non-White and White girls had the potential to get pregnant by male teens when off on a “hooky spree.” Children with work permits (legal truants who were disproportionately teens of color), the *Daily News* article explained, were also more likely to make the shift from legal truant to habitual truant to juvenile delinquent because they only attended school part-time in the first place and found it more difficult to avoid temptations and attend school after their work shift.<sup>41</sup> This raced, gendered, and class-based argument about the way delinquency could lead to interracial sexual relationships and teen pregnancy drew from the logic that non-White girls were inherently hypersexual and that White girls’ engagement in behaviors deemed criminal, such as truancy and interracial sexual relationships, could corrupt their purportedly superior genetic stock.

The Los Angeles City Schools had reported for decades that non-White girls were more prone to truancy and juvenile delinquency, but the attention that Allen had drawn to White, middle-class girls was new during WWII. An annual report from 1917, for instance, stated: “The adolescent girl is the chief problem when the question arises of enforcing compulsory school attendance,” and the “truancy percentage of the Mexicans, Italians, and Russians is unduly high, in part because of their domestic labor (paid or unpaid).”<sup>42</sup> The emphasis on the “unpaid” domestic labor of girls suggested that young women of color were likely caring for siblings because they came from neglectful parentage. Allen’s handwritten notes about the number of White female truants for the 1946 panel discussion carried the eugenic assumption that truancy was more of danger for White girls because it could degrade their racial stock, especially because she crossed out “~~white~~” and instead scrawled the common eugenic moniker “Anglo-Saxon” in its place.

Gendered, raced, and classed verbiage and eugenic logic about heredity and rising rates of juvenile delinquency also provided the BOE ammunition to continue revising public school sex education curricula to focus on genetics as a means of preventing hereditary behaviors like poor parenting and criminality. Allen’s written remarks

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*America’s First Juvenile Court* (New York: Rutledge, 2001); and Jennifer Trost, *Gateway to Justice: The Juvenile Court and Progressive Child in a Southern City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005). Little has been written about the mid-twentieth century, with the exception of some historical and social psychological research on “problem girls.” See Steven Schlossman and Robert B. Cairns, “Problem Girls: Observations on Past and Present,” in *Children in Time and Place: Developmental and Historical Insights*, ed. Glen H. Elder Jr., John Modell, and Ross D. Park (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 110-30; Rachel Devlin, *Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Daughters, and Postwar American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Amanda Hope Littauer, “Unsanctioned Encounters: Women, Girls, and Non-marital Sexuality in the United States, 1941-1963” (PhD diss., University of California Berkeley, 2006); and Carrie Settle Hagan, “Girls, Sex, and Juvenile Justice in Post-World War II Los Angeles” (PhD diss., Carnegie Mellon University, 2012).

<sup>40</sup>“Notes for Mrs. Eleanor B. Allen,” folder 1, box 894, UCLA-LAUSD Records. The crossed-out word *white* is in the original.

<sup>41</sup>Gibbs, “Truants Given Lesson on Folly of ‘Hooky Spree,’” 3.

<sup>42</sup>Los Angeles City School District, Department of Compulsory Education and Child Welfare, “Annual Report of the Director, Year Ending June 30, 1917,” 65-69, box 17, UCLA-LAUSD.

in 1946 were accompanied by an open discussion about the BOE's "Truancy Detail" report from spring of 1945. The report contrasted stories about two truants: Jane Doe, a White teenage girl from a "good family," and John Doe, a seven-year-old "negro, a pupil of one of our Elementary schools." Jane, age fourteen, was from a small town near Salt Lake City, Utah. She had been duped into running far away from home by a boyfriend who came from a broken home (one of his parents lived in Salt Lake City and the other in Los Angeles). Jane found herself abandoned in Los Angeles with "no clothing except what she had on, which was very scant. A dirty blue suit, thin, blouse, and a comb and lip stick [*sic*] in her hand."<sup>43</sup> Morally upright teen girls would not be found in public wearing "scant" clothing and in possession of only a comb and tube of lipstick, and these details about Jane's scandalous appearance indicated that vanity, sexual impropriety, and the corruptive influence of a juvenile delinquent boyfriend (who might have been a person of color) led Jane to flee her home. Jane, according to the truant officer, had not turned herself in to ask for help because "she was fearful of the outcome after she returned home, knowing full well she would be turned over to the Juvenile Court, for an [legal and gynecological] examination." The report implied that Jane's superior heredity was at risk from her actions—she was possibly pregnant and might even be deemed "feble-minded" and convicted of sex delinquency because of her salacious exploits; the officer noted that Jane's future prospects were "dim." The possibility of interracial sexual activity, combined with the fact that Jane's boyfriend came from a broken home (an indicator to supporters of eugenics that he was of lesser genetic stock and even a person of color), meant that Jane's story and her future progeny's could only end without redemption. The BOE held up Jane's case as an exemplar because of its shock value. Read through the lens of eugenic thinking about the risks of truancy, Jane's story made a strong case for reinstating the "Truancy Detail" to prevent interracial sexual relationships and the risk of genetic mutations. It also highlighted the civic nature of marriage, divorce, broken homes, truancy, juvenile delinquency, and "illegitimate" reproduction—how all these things were particularly disastrous for young White girls because of how they could affect their genetic stock and future generations.

In contrast, the lesson derived from John Doe's story was both about the threat of John's truancy and the threat posed by his mother. At age seven and a half, the kicking and screaming young Black child, John Doe, had been dragged into the truancy office by a driver and a school supervisor. Initially, John "would not talk, except to use profanity, that would put a hardened criminal to shame." After making some lies and attempts to evade returning to his home, he eventually relented, explaining to the truancy officer that he was living with a single mother. As it turned out, John had a long history of truancy and juvenile delinquency: "He had broken windows, thrown iodine in a girl's face, and refused to be disciplined in any way. He had been in Juvenile Hall, and was a ring leader [*sic*] there for terrorism." Despite his many transgressions, John's probation officer (PO) reported that the root cause of John's behavior was his unfit mother. She "was not interested in her children, since her attentions were centered on her 'boy friend' [*sic*] and liquor. When the PO called at the home, mother was

<sup>43</sup>Report from Los Angeles Board of Education, "Truancy Detail," n.d. (enclosed with notes from 1946 campaign to reinstate truancy detail), folder 1, box 894, UCLA-LAUSD Records.

entertaining the friend, and liquor was in evidence; she did not know where her children were, nor could the PO find them in the neighborhood.”<sup>44</sup> The report explained that with proper parenting, John’s average IQ test results should have helped redeem him. But John’s mother was irredeemable; her poor parenting had made John “a dreg in society”—going from the streets to juvenile hall and back again—because she was unmarried, sexually promiscuous, and likely an alcoholic who had failed at her civic duty to be a good parent.<sup>45</sup> Eugenic education about the link between heredity and intelligence, the report maintained, would have helped John’s mother resist the urge to reproduce and make parenting decisions.

To the PTA and BOE, Jane’s and John’s stories demonstrated that immediate action was required at the local and state levels to decrease juvenile delinquency and improve reproductive decision-making. The California PTA, led by a newly elected president, Mrs. Edward W. Raith, reacted to these reports by petitioning the Los Angeles BOE to reinstate the truancy detail. After hearing Jane and John Doe’s stories, the BOE quickly acquiesced.<sup>46</sup>

### Sex Education Goes to the California Legislature

At the end of the Second World War, eugenics-inspired sex education remained at the forefront of people’s minds as they plotted out how to confront rising rates of juvenile delinquency. In 1945, pressured by the demands of constituents, two bills related to juvenile delinquency went before the California legislature. Buried in committee, neither bill passed, despite having received support from then governor and future Supreme Court justice Earl Warren. The first bill mainly drew awareness to the problem; it had the narrow goal of requiring parents to appear in court after a child’s second arrest.<sup>47</sup> Long Beach assemblymen Lorne D. Middough spearheaded the second bill, which was larger, more complicated, and therefore became more controversial.<sup>48</sup> Middough’s bill drew from the report of a committee that Governor Warren had convened to investigate the rising rates of juvenile delinquency, and it offered a comprehensive plan that included a wide array of individuals, agencies, and organizations in California.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup>Report from Los Angeles Board of Education, “Truancy Detail,” n.d.

<sup>45</sup>Report from Los Angeles Board of Education, “Truancy Detail.”

<sup>46</sup>Mrs. Arthur Crum, Secretary of the Tenth District California Congress of Parents and Teachers, to Mr. C. L. Craig, Secretary of the Los Angeles BOE, March 5, 1945, folder 1, Box 894, UCLA-LAUSD Records; Vierling Kirsey, Superintendent of the Los Angeles City Board of Education, “Communication to the Budget and Finance Committee, Subject: Truancy Detail,” Feb. 22, 1945, folder 1, box 894, UCLA-LAUSD Records; C. L. Craig, Assistant Secretary, to Mrs. Edward W. Raith, President, Tenth District California Congress of Parents and Teachers,” Feb. 16, 1945, folder 1, box 894, UCLA-LAUSD Records; Vierling Kirsey, Superintendent of the Los Angeles City Board of Education, “A Report and Recommendation Relating to the Truancy Detail,” n.d. [likely 1946 or 1947], folder 1, box 894, UCLA-LAUSD Records.

<sup>47</sup>Assemblymen Gardiner Johnson of Berkeley and Philip Davis of West Los Angeles proposed the bill. See “Holding Parents Responsible,” *Pasadena Star-News*, Jan. 31, 1945, 4.

<sup>48</sup>Image from “Endorsements,” *Long Beach Independent*, May 15, 1944, 8. For campaign details, see Political Advertisement, “Not a Rubber Stamp!,” *Long Beach Independent*, Aug. 14, 1942, 18.

<sup>49</sup>*Preliminary Report, Assembly Interim Committee on Juvenile Delinquency, House Resolution No. 268* (Sacramento: California State Print Office, 1944).

Family life-sex education and eugenic ideas featured prominently in Middough's bill, although the bill proposed several other solutions for juvenile delinquency.<sup>50</sup> The massive \$1.2 million legislation, for example, recommended a statewide delinquency coordinating council, free laboratories and drugs to treat venereal diseases, state aid to working mothers, and twenty-four-hour schools for "pre-delinquents" (minor children deemed at risk for future delinquency).<sup>51</sup> As one of the forty-one proposed recommendations, the sex education provision received the most frequent attention in the media because the Associated Press and United Press reprinted stories about it. News coverage described the continued inclusion of eugenics and the gendered nature of family life-sex education programs, arguing that "sensible preparation for life" should include "short informal lectures, educational films, pertinent material diagrams posted on the bulletin board, and, most of all, sympathetic answers to questions of girls."<sup>52</sup> At the time, "material diagrams" typically included anatomical graphics, charts detailing the biological process of reproduction and heredity, and drawings showing how egg fertilization and child birth happened. Middough focused specifically on girls when advocating for the bill because he saw their reproductive choices as being responsible for wider social problems like juvenile delinquency, unwed motherhood, poor parenting, criminality, divorce, and broken homes. As Middough curtly summarized: "If we are to keep our youths out of the electric chair, we must begin with the highchair."<sup>53</sup> To Middough and supporters of his bill, topics like marriage, reproduction, heredity, and juvenile delinquency were so intertwined with reproductive decisions that they needed to be addressed together.

Still not all were convinced that a bill mandating this form of public school sex education would curb hereditary issues without creating other problems. Mrs. Marie Jones—a PTA member and mother of two teenage daughters—protested the sex education portion of Middough's bill.<sup>54</sup> The BOE committee rebuffed her complaints upon

<sup>50</sup>Newspapers on March 6 reported there were thirty-seven provisions, but after March 7 they referred to the bill as having forty-one provisions. It is unclear why the number of provisions changed overnight, or which were added at the last minute (the newspapers and legislative records are not incisive), but sex education was in the bill from the start and there were likely some ongoing negotiations among committee members.

<sup>51</sup>It even specified that laws should be passed to require bicycles to be locked when parked. "Middough Recommends," *Sacramento Bee*, Jan. 18, 1945, 4; "Legislation to Combat Delinquency Recommended," *Petaluma Argus-Courier* (Petaluma, CA), March 6, 1945, 1; "Sex Education in Schools Is Urged," *Appeal-Democrat* (Marysville, CA), March 6, 1945, 2; "State War on Child Delinquency Urged," *Long Beach Independent*, March 7, 1945, 13; "Sex Teaching Proposed in High Schools: Assembly Committee Urges Drive on Juvenile Delinquency," *Citizen-News* (Hollywood, CA), March 6, 1945, 1; "Sex Teaching in Schools Is Urged by Assembly Group," *San Pedro News-Pilot*, March 6, 1945, 3; "Scientific Study of Sex Urged for Adolescents," *Sacramento Bee*, March 6, 1945, 4; "Fight Juvenile Delinquency: Sex Instruction in High Schools Advocated As One Point in New Education Campaign," *Pomona Progress Bulletin*, March 6, 1945, 1; "Juvenile Bills Win Support of Authorities," *San Francisco Examiner*, March 9, 1945, 5; "Legislators to Attempt Curbs for Delinquency," *San Bernardino County Sun*, March 9, 1945.

<sup>52</sup>"Sex Education in Schools Is Urged," 2.

<sup>53</sup>"Special Session Urged to Provide Money to Help Child Care Centers: Assembly Group Asks Action in Delinquency War," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 31, 1945, 13-14.

<sup>54</sup>"Notes from Informal Committee of the Whole," March 8, 1945, folder 4, box 1163, UCLA-LAUSD Records.

hearing them, stalling its decision to weigh in by referring the matter to the superintendent. Undeterred, Jones complained to the *Los Angeles Times* and *Pomona Progress Bulletin*.<sup>55</sup> In articles about her protest, Jones bemoaned the sex education portion of Middough's bill, arguing that too much information about sex "stimulated sexual activity," "led to juvenile delinquency," and "harmed the bond between parents and children."<sup>56</sup> Her objections were not directed at the eugenic content in sex education (genetics, heredity, and choice of mate), and so Jones may have thought the publicity of these news articles would bring others to her cause. It did the opposite. Schools, parents, and prominent religious leaders instead chimed in and enthusiastically explained that the eugenics-inspired family life topics in sex education were a crucial means of bolstering the White American nuclear family.<sup>57</sup>

The PTA and columnists in the *Los Angeles Times* defended the focus of sex ed in Middough bill's that Jones had objected to, refuting her complaint on the grounds that parents and teachers in Los Angeles County had been demanding *more*, not *less* sex education for themselves and their students. An opinion article in the *Los Angeles Times* directly addressed Jones's complaint, arguing that teachers "have spent precious after-school freedom and equally precious rationed gas to attend a series of 10 lectures [given by Mrs. Frances Bruce Strain, a nationally renowned expert on family life education], for which they do not receive even institute credit. Seriousness like that is more than an indication of a passing curiosity. It is a symbol of a great public need. And be it said here, teachers of public schools ever have been among the first to sense these public needs."<sup>58</sup> The opinion piece's focus on sex education fulfilling a "public need" underscored how many saw family life-sex education as a female civic responsibility that would improve society.

PTA President Raith's response to Jones's grievance connected sex education to the heritability of juvenile delinquency and fears of White "race suicide." Raith argued that the specific curriculum to which Jones objected was "conducted primarily for hygiene teachers" by a carefully selected expert on "preparation for family living," Mrs. Frances Bruce Strain.<sup>59</sup> Strain was well educated, the wife of a Congregationalist minister, a

<sup>55</sup>"Sex Education in Schools: Plan Fought by Mother," *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 1945, 11; clipping also in folder 4, box 1163, UCLA-LAUSD Records; "L.A. Woman Hits Sex Education," *Pomona Progress Bulletin*, March 9, 1945, 14.

<sup>56</sup>"Sex Education in Schools: Plan Fought by Mother," 11.

<sup>57</sup>I found no evidence in the superintendent's papers that he responded to Jones's complaint or that other parents supported her antiquated claim. Quite the opposite, in fact: records suggest that a significant number of parents attended lectures for teachers on sex education given by Mrs. Frances Strain and demanded that more be offered. See "Sex Education in Schools: Plan Fought by Mother," 11; "Ere We Adjourn," *Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 1945, 26; "Tenth District Sponsoring Repeat Lectures," *Southwest Wave* (Los Angeles, CA), April 19, 1945, 13; and "Dr. Strain Plans Lecture at School," *Metropolitan Pasadena Star-News*, March 12, 1945, 5. Historians of sex education have largely agreed that family life-sex education was enthusiastically embraced by those that traditionally opposed sex education, such as parents and religious organizations. See Freeman, *Sex Goes to School*, 10; Moran, *Teaching Sex*, 122-24; Slominski, *Teaching Moral Sex*, 123-68; and Lord, *Condom Nation*, 95-96.

<sup>58</sup>"Ere We Adjourn," March 25, 1945, 26.

<sup>59</sup>See "P.-T.A. Offers 3 Lectures on Sex Education," *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 16, 1941, 8; and "Your Child: His Family, Friends," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 1, 1943, 13.



nationally known sex educator, and an author of several nationally known books.<sup>60</sup> Strain was also not a newcomer to the sex education scene when she lectured on eugenics and family life-sex education in Los Angeles. Strain had the backing of prominent eugenicists like Paul Popenoe at the American Institute of Family Relations (AIFR).<sup>61</sup> Her publications, such as *Being Born: A Book of Facts for Boys and Girls* (1936), *Love at the Threshold: A Book on Social Dating, Romance, and Marriage* (1939), *Teen Days: A Book For Boys and Girls* (1946), and *Sex Guidance in Family Life Education* (1946), discussed the eugenic importance of genetics and heredity, women's choice of mate, and how reproductive decisions could lead to social problems.<sup>62</sup> In *Teen Days*, for example, Strain argued, "A woman is a production (we say a reproduction) unit."<sup>63</sup> Raith's defense of Strain's lectures derived from her support of this framing of sex education.

The following year, after Jones's complaint and the Middough bill stalled in committee, Strain returned to Los Angeles County to give additional lectures to sex educators.<sup>64</sup> In defense of Strain's lectures and the public schools' role in sex ed, Popenoe publicly vowed that the AIFR would continue working with Los Angeles public schools to improve sex education. He couched his support in the (perhaps exaggerated) eugenic claim that in other places like Pittsburgh where the AIFR had intervened, lecturing on eugenic topics like "choice of mate" reduced "illegitimate pregnancies" by "more than

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<sup>60</sup>Image from "Public School P-T to Sponsor Lecture April 8," *Morning Call* (Allentown, PA), March 26, 1940, 16. Frances Bruce Strain's widely read sex education books included *New Patterns in Sex Teaching* (1934), *Being Born* (1936), and *Love at the Threshold* (1939). See Strain, *New Patterns in Sex Teaching: The Normal Interests of Children and the Guidance from Infancy to Adolescence* (Boston, MA: D. Appleton and Century Publishers, 1934); *Being Born: A Book of Facts for Boys and Girls* (Boston, MA: D. Appleton and Century Publishers, 1936); and *Love at the Threshold: A Book on Social Dating, Romance, and Marriage* (Boston, MA: D. Appleton and Century Publishers, 1939). See also Paul Popenoe, "Youth's Social Education Stressed," *Pasadena Post*, Feb. 7, 1943, 11; and Frances Bruce Strain and Chester Lee Eggert, *Framework for Family Life Education: A Survey of Present-Day Activities in Sex Education* (Washington, DC: American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, A Department of the National Education Association, 1956).

<sup>61</sup>Strain had taught sex education coursework for the Chicago PTA; Cleveland and Cincinnati Social Hygiene Societies, and run summer sessions on family relations for the University of Vermont. (Shortly after her stint in Los Angeles, she would run a summer session at the University of California at Berkeley.)

<sup>62</sup>Strain, *Being Born*; *Love at the Threshold*; *Teen Days: A Book for Boys and Girls* (Boston, MA: D. Appleton and Century Publishers, 1946); and *Sex Guidance in Family Life Education* (Boston, MA: D. Appleton and Century Publishers, 1946).

<sup>63</sup>Strain, *Teen Days*, 53.

<sup>64</sup>In 1946, Strain returned to Pasadena, Wilmington, West Los Angeles, Redondo Beach, Torrance, and other surrounding areas to give lectures for the PTA, the Young Women's Christian Association, and other study groups for parents and teachers. See "Association Meetings," *Metropolitan Pasadena Star-News*, Feb. 3, 1945, 8; "Sex Lectures at RUHS P-T.A. Meet," *Redondo Reflex* (Redondo, CA), Jan. 4, 1946, 1; "Nightingale," *Lincoln Heights Bulletin-News* (Los Angeles, CA), Jan. 18, 1945, 8; "Plan Vacations for Rosemary Cottage Girls," *Pasadena Independent*, June 12, 1946, 9; "Association Meetings," *Metropolitan Star-News* (Pasadena, CA), Jan. 27, 1946, 8; "P-TA Members Attend Series," *Southwest Wave* (Los Angeles, CA), Feb. 8, 1945, 3; "Psychologist on Delinquency," *Metropolitan Pasadena Star-News*, Dec. 8, 1946, 6; and "Gateway Council," *Wilmington Daily Press Journal* (Wilmington, CA), Jan. 12, 1946, 3. From 1947 to 1949, Popenoe and Strain lectured at summer sessions on family relations at the University of California at Los Angeles, University of California at Berkeley, and San Francisco State College. See "Sexual Promiscuity to Be Topic of Thursday Lecture," *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), March 27, 1949, 8.

one-half.”<sup>65</sup> The role that Popenoe envisioned for Strain and groups like the AIFR during and after WWII was in teacher training and curricular development for family life-sex education that emphasized positive eugenics.

Popenoe began lecturing in teacher-training programs for social hygiene and sex education as early as 1920, and throughout WWII he worked closely with sex educators, collecting copies of their curricula to find a model for the public schools in California to use.<sup>66</sup> He appeared to find it in the work of Mrs. Adeline C. Richardson of Thomas Jefferson High School, in Los Angeles County.<sup>67</sup> Richardson’s course of study, “Units in Family Relations,” repackaged eugenic theories from the early twentieth century as “genetics,” “heredity,” and “choice of mate”—intentionally avoiding the word *eugenics* and taking the strong stance that adhering to eugenic principles would prevent juvenile delinquency, truancy, and bad parenting and thus protect the ideal White American nuclear family.

The focus on genetics and heredity and scant use of the word *eugenics* is notable in Richardson’s curricula. Her lessons featured titles like “Learning about Ourselves—Heredity and Environment,” and they described how genetic inheritance

<sup>65</sup>Bess M. Wilson, “Child Welfare Peril Seen in Divorce Rate: American Institute of Family Relations Head Points Trends in Marital Discord,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 1945, 41.

<sup>66</sup>Haager, “Teacher Training for Sex Education during and after WWI,” 107-66. University of Utah, Department of Home Economics, “Outline and Topical References for Home Economics 180: Marriage and Family Relationships,” folder 7, box 118, Paul Popenoe Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie (hereafter AHC-Popenoe Papers); Lois Keint, Chaffey High School Home Economics Department, “Social Arts Course of Study 11th and 12th Grades,” revised 1943, folder 1, box 119, AHC-Popenoe Papers; Evelyn Mills Duvall, “Marriage Education for Today: A Demonstration Course on Education for Marriage Designed for Adult Leaders by The Association for Family Living, Chicago, Illinois,” March 15-April 26, 1944, folder 1, box 119, AHC-Popenoe Papers; “Programme of Studies for the High School: Bulletin A Prescribed Courses for the Year Ending July 15, 1945,” Department of Education, Alberta, Canada, folder 1, box 119, AHC-Popenoe Papers; Lillian K. Graeber, Coordinator of Guidance at Thomas Jefferson High School, Los Angeles, CA, to Mrs. C. B. Fry, Institute of Family Relations, Los Angeles, CA, May 8, 1945, folder 1, box 119, Folder 1, AHC-Popenoe Papers; Paul Popenoe, Director AIFR, to Mrs. Richardson, Chairman of the Basic Course Department at Thomas Jefferson High School, Los Angeles, CA, May 14, 1945, folder 1, box 119, AHC-Popenoe Papers; Ralph N. D. Atkinson, Denver, Colorado, to Dr. Paul Popenoe, Los Angeles, CA, May 21, 1945, folder 1, box 119, AHC-Popenoe Papers; P. C. Bechtel, Department of Health and Physical Education at West Liberty Public Schools, West Liberty, OH, to Dr. Paul Popenoe, AIFR, July 5, 1945, folder 1, box 119, AHC-Popenoe Papers; Senior High School, Tulsa Public Schools, “Relationships within the Home,” July 1945, folder 1, box 119, AHC-Popenoe Papers; and Paul Popenoe, AIFR, to Adeline Richardson, Thomas Jefferson High School, Los Angeles, CA, Aug. 29, 1945, folder 1, box 119, AHC-Popenoe Papers.

<sup>67</sup>Popenoe to Richardson, May 14, 1945; and Popenoe to Richardson, Aug. 29, 1945. I found very little on Adeline C. Richardson’s background other than some scattered newspaper articles listing her name in conjunction with the PTA, school counseling positions at Thomas Jefferson High School, and Pi Lambda Theta, an honor society for educators. Popenoe made no indication of her racial, educational, or marital background in his letters, and I found nothing definitive to indicate how she found her way into teaching sex education in her correspondence or in the local newspapers where her name was mentioned. See “P.T.-A. Has New Officer,” *California Eagle* (Los Angeles, CA), July 29, 1943, 4; “Sam Brown Is Jeff Coordinator,” *California Eagle* (Los Angeles, CA), Sept. 11, 1941, 6; Leslie E. Claypool, “If Warren Is Smart He’ll Ditch PDT—Claypool,” *Daily News* (Los Angeles, CA), Oct. 20, 1948, 12; “Jefferson High School PTA Life Membership Tea Huge Success,” *California Eagle* (Los Angeles, CA), June 7, 1945, 20; “Jefferson P-TA Sponsors Life Membership Benefit,” *Southwest Wave* (Los Angeles, CA), June 17, 1945, 19; and “Jefferson High P-TA Head Tells Year’s Chairmen,” *California Eagle* (Los Angeles, CA), Aug. 13, 1942, 7.

should guide one's "choice of a mate" because of the threat "racial degeneration" posed to the United States.<sup>68</sup> The course outline also drew from the work of notable eugenicists like Henry Goddard, explaining how girls had a civic responsibility to preserve the American nuclear family by making eugenic reproductive choices. The pervasiveness of discussions about genetics, heredity, immigration, and birthright citizenship in the course was reflective of the ongoing debates about juvenile delinquency and divorce included in Middough's bill and Strain's BOE-sponsored lectures. And, like Allen, Richardson identified young White girls as the target of family life-sex education. Girls' reproduction, she argued, was a civic responsibility that would not only "help solve common problems of family association" but also "help solve individual, personal problems of the student."<sup>69</sup> Richardson, Popenoe, and the others involved in Los Angeles County public schools saw family life-sex education as a female civic responsibility; they assumed that "bad" hereditary would lead to broken families and juvenile delinquency, both of which posed a particularly dangerous threat to the ideal White American nuclear family during wartime.<sup>70</sup>

### Conclusion: Sex Education Films and a "Well Developed" Program, 1948

What exactly were students learning about sex in Los Angeles's city schools, Los Angeles Councilman Ernest E. Debs's constituents wondered just a few years later? In response, to a March 1948 phone call from Debs, M. E. Herriott, principal of Lafayette Junior High School, wrote confidently that the teachers giving instruction "had considerable preparation [emphasis in original]" and were "taking further work in this field [sex education] at present time. We also have given supervision to this instruction, but your interest will be of assistance in helping us to adjust our program so as not to violate the modesty of the children, especially our Mexican youth. Permit me to add that instruction relating to sex is but one phase of a more comprehensive program in family relations."<sup>71</sup> Herriott's confident tone and sensitivity to push for sex education that did not violate Mexican students' "modesty" was perhaps a coded way of describing the invasive gynecological exams and sterilizations that many young Mexican American girls experienced after being incarcerated in juvenile reformatories.<sup>72</sup> And his insistence that family life-sex education addressed more than "instruction in sex" stemmed from the fact that Los Angeles's city Schools had been engaged with parents and eugenicists-turned-marriage experts in a decade-long

<sup>68</sup>Mrs. Adeline Richardson, Thomas Jefferson High School, Los Angeles, CA, "Units in Family Relations Course," 1945, folder 1, box 119, AHC-Popenoe Papers.

<sup>69</sup>Richardson, "Units in Family Relations Course," Test I.

<sup>70</sup>Moran, *Teaching Sex*, 61-63.

<sup>71</sup>Given Herriott's response, and LAUSD correspondence in 1936 about hiring "negro teachers" at Lafayette Junior High School, it is likely that Debs's constituents were Mexican American and/or African American. See "Minutes Communication, H. E. Griffin, Secretary of the Los Angeles Board of Education, Sept. 10, 1936, folder 7, box 1596, UCLA-LAUSD Records. Quote from M. E. Herriott, Principal, to Councilman Ernest M. Debs, March 31, 1948, folder 4, box 1163, UCLA-LAUSD Records.

<sup>72</sup>For more on Mexican American girls' experiences in juvenile reformatories, see, for example, Chávez-García, *States of Delinquency*, 112-50; and Kafka, *The History of "Zero Tolerance" in American Public Schooling*, 17-53.

process of introducing eugenic “better breeding” topics into family life-sex education curricula.

At that time, Principal Herriott was not alone in receiving inquiries about the nature of sex education in the city’s schools.<sup>73</sup> Sex education seemed to have exploded on the national scene that month because *Time* magazine had printed an article, “Sex in the Schoolroom,” that documented children’s responses to the introduction of *Human Growth*, an animated sex education film by former Disney artists being used in Oregon’s public schools.<sup>74</sup> Interest in *Human Growth* grew nationwide because researchers at the University of Oregon reported finding that students were comfortable with the film’s detailed animations of puberty and reproduction. In response to the article in *Time*, Martin Ruderman of the Federation of Jewish Welfare Organizations in Los Angeles, together with a group of parents, wrote to the BOE asking for the film to be used in family life-sex education.<sup>75</sup> Members of the BOE acquiesced but responded dismissively to these queries, arguing that sex ed in Los Angeles had long included the same “family living” goals as the film *Human Growth* and that the curricula used was much more comprehensive.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, the curricular plan laid out by the BOE included more eugenic topics than *Human Growth*, which glossed over eugenic instructions for one’s “choice of mate” and instead focused on the biological aspects of puberty and reproduction (e.g., hormones, hair growth, egg fertilization, cell division). By 1948, eugenics-inspired family life topics like “choice of mate” and the social impact of heredity (such as juvenile delinquency and divorce) were an integral part of schools’ curricular plan for biology, physical education, manual training, home economics, vocational education, adult education, and teacher training throughout California.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup>Parents also petitioned the BOE to purchase *Human Growth* for sex education. See “Westport Heights Parent-Teacher Association to Los Angeles Board of Education,” Nov. 15, 1949, folder 4, box 1163, UCLA-LAUSD Records; “Communication to the Law and Rules Committee from the Business Division, No. 1,” March 6, 1950, folder 4, box 1163, UCLA-LAUSD Records; “Curriculum Division Bulletin No. EC-9,” Sept. 20, 1950, folder 4, box 1163, UCLA-LAUSD Records; and “Mrs. J. Paul Elliot, President of the 10th District California Congress of Parents and Teachers, to Dr. Alexander J. Stoddard, Superintendent of the Los Angeles City Schools,” Jan. 24, 1952, folder 4, box 1163, UCLA-LAUSD Records.

<sup>74</sup>“Sex in the Schoolroom,” *Time*, March 22, 1948, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,804509,00.html>. Image from retrospective on the *Time* article. See Eliza Berman, “See How Children Reacted to One of the First Sex-Ed Films Ever Shown,” *Life Magazine*, June 9, 2015, <https://time.com/3828576/sex-education-1940s/feed>.

<sup>75</sup>Martin Ruderman, Acting Director of the Federation of Jewish Welfare Organizations, to Mr. Maynard Toll, President of the Los Angeles BOE, March 22, 1948, folder 4, box 1163, UCLA-LAUSD Records.

<sup>76</sup>Sex education films had also been available since 1914 and used in teacher training since 1920. *Damaged Goods* was the first sex education film to enter the scene in 1913; it was a silent film about venereal disease that very few saw. Government-produced films emerged during WWI and WWII such as “*Are You Fit to Marry?*” The film *Human Growth* was different from earlier films for school use because it was mass-marketed and endorsed by psychologists. See Robert Eberwein, *Sex Ed: Film, Video, and the Framework of Desire* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 1–14; 113–15; and Haager, “Chapter 4: Family Relations and Sex Education in California, 1930–1940,” 167–225.

<sup>77</sup>The Tenth District PTA and the Venereal Disease Council of the City and County of Los Angeles successfully petitioned the Los Angeles BOE to purchase the film *Human Growth*. Dr. Stoddard, Superintendent of Schools, to Mr. Daniel G. Howell, Executive Secretary of the Venereal Disease Council of the City and County of Los Angeles, Inc., Oct. 17, 1949, folder 4, box 1163, UCLA-LAUSD Records; “Westport Heights Parent-Teacher Association to Los Angeles Board of Education,” Nov. 15, 1949; “Communication to the Law

Ralph Eckert, whose family life-sex education curricula was heralded by PTA president Esther Walker in 1942, had since become the director of parent education for the California State Department of Education. In lecturing before a showing of *Human Growth*, Eckert asked audience members from the PTA: "If America's mental, criminal and alcoholic institutions today are as crowded with men and women, who are largely because of their failure never to know a stable home life, what will happen in America 25 years from now, when the children of homes being broken in today's increasing number of divorces have reached adulthood?"<sup>78</sup> Eckert's lectures and newspaper coverage on a statewide tour during the 1948-1949 school year reveal that eugenic ideas about genetics and heredity remained an important feature of family life instruction in genetics, heredity, and parenthood after WWII, even though few parents and teachers recognized them as eugenics.<sup>79</sup> On his lecture tour, Eckert also repeated the same dubious divorce statistics that Allen had emphasized at the truancy meeting in 1946—that one in two marriages resulted in divorce in California and there was "almost an equal number of marriages and divorces in Los Angeles."<sup>80</sup> Eckert maintained that juvenile delinquency stemmed from "bad" heredity. He argued: "Youth today has [*sic*] been granted the right to choose a mate" but need "education on how to choose." Instruction in "accurate, wholesome, and scientific" topics like genetics, heredity, parenting, marriage, courtship, and puberty would guide children—especially young girls—in their ability to make these important civic choices. Only then, Eckert maintained, can "real progress ... be made toward new frontiers of better human relationships."<sup>81</sup>

The "well developed" family life program that Principal Herriott, Eckert, Allen, the Los Angeles BOE, and the California PTA envisioned by the end of WWII used eugenic logic to connect truancy, delinquency, and citizenship to genetics, heredity, and ultimately one's choice of mate. Although the wartime context and avoidance of the term *eugenics* obscured the eugenic origins of this ideological connection, it was a clear motivator for public school instruction to include family life topics like marriage and parenthood. Swapping the term *eugenics* for *genetics* and viewing heredity as responsible for behavioral choices (such as those relating to criminality, divorce, and poor

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and Rules Committee from the Business Division, No. 1," March 6, 1950; "Curriculum Division Bulletin No. EC-9," Sept. 20, 1950; Elliot to Stoddard, Jan. 24, 1952.

<sup>78</sup>"Schools Must Meet Challenge in Family Life Education—Eckert," *Ventura County Star* (Ventura, CA), March 19, 1948, 6-7.

<sup>79</sup>Listings of Eckert's lectures were in local PTA announcements across more than a dozen local newspapers. For a representative sampling, see "P-TA Health Director Arranges Parent Education Project," *Times* (San Mateo, CA), Oct. 26, 1948, 10; "18th District CCPT to Hear Dr. Ralph Eckert," *Napa Journal*, Nov. 12, 1948, 2; "Child Specialist Will Open Yuba Lectures," *Sacramento Bee*, Dec. 28, 1948, 10; and "Dr. Eckert to Lecture," *Whittier News* (Whittier, CA), March 3, 1948, 4. Lectures and showings of *Human Growth* were also abundant, and announcements were made in more than a dozen local newspapers. For a sampling of announcements, see "Educator Addresses P-T.A. on Organization of UN," *Contra Costa Gazette* (Martinez, CA), "Southwest Council Meets at Center Avenue School," *Southwest Wave* (Los Angeles, CA), May 6, 1948, 8; "PTA Study Groups Announce Programs," *Placer Herald* (Rocklin, CA), Dec. 19, 1948, 8; and "Medical Aid Speaks at Session," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 27, 1948, 34.

<sup>80</sup>"Schools Must Meet Challenge in Family Life Education—Eckert," 6.

<sup>81</sup>"Schools Must Meet Challenge in Family Life Education—Eckert," 6-7.

parenting) also helped to disconnect these topics from the increasingly unpopular formal science of eugenics and negative eugenic programs like juvenile incarceration and sterilization.

The disconnection ensured that heredity and genetics came to be seen as acceptable and, importantly, value-neutral foundations of public school sex education into the twenty-first century. Rather than force eugenic restrictions on reproduction through formal legislation and policy, family life-sex education topics in Los Angeles public schools aimed to encourage the use of positive eugenic principles, such as selective “better breeding” strategies, to solve social problems.<sup>82</sup> As this article has shown, eugenic ideas about choosing a mate with “good heredity” were subtle but influential because they not only derived from larger fears about interracial reproduction but could also be folded into wider WWII-era discussions about truancy, juvenile delinquency, parenting, and citizenship. And, as we saw with Mrs. Jones’s opposition to Middough’s proposed bill, the subtlety of this side of eugenics—as something that worked ideologically instead of tangibly like sterilization or incarceration—also prevented sustained opposition to eugenic instruction from coalescing. Jones’s objections to the eugenic content of sex education and her complaints fell flat.

The fact that genetics and heredity have for the most part been widely accepted as value-neutral topics in sex education since the mid-twentieth-century rise of abstinence-only sex education is evidence that eugenicists were for the most part successful in these efforts. Indeed, prominent right-wing advocates of abstinence-only public school sex education, such as James Dobson of Focus on the Family, were protégés of eugenicist and family life-sex education proponent Paul Popenoe. Just about every other topic included in sex education curricula—evolution, marriage, parenting, puberty, disease, pregnancy, gender expression, and sexual orientation—and the matter of which age to teach young people about those topics has come under scrutiny during the past fifty years, while genetic and hereditarian content has escaped largely unscathed.<sup>83</sup>

This article has argued, however, that sex education topics like genetics and heredity are not value neutral, and are not separate from the gendered civic purpose of sex education, which has emphasized women’s reproduction as a civic virtue and seeks to reinforce the racist, heterosexual, White American nuclear family as the ideal. Topics in sex education like genetics and hereditarianism—which ask students to consider how their inheritance might be passed on to a future generation and can lead to racist, ableist, and eugenics-inspired assumptions about “good” and “bad” heredity—have roots in the eugenics movement. These ideas are tied to the assumption that certain individuals’ reproduction and genetic makeup is of a higher civic value. Recent political

<sup>82</sup>On efforts to involuntarily sterilize women, see Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Fixing the Poor: Eugenic Sterilization and Child Welfare in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017); Schoen, *Choice and Coercion*; and Stern, *Eugenic Nation*. On eugenic segregation of wayward girls, see Michael A. Rembis, *Defining Deviance: Sex, Science, and Delinquent Girls, 1890-1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Chávez-García, *States of Delinquency*; Zipf, *Bad Girls at Samarcand*; Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*; and Alexander, *The “Girl Problem.”*

<sup>83</sup>Petrzela, *Classroom Wars*; Nancy Kendall, *The Sex Education Debates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); and More, *The Transformation of American Sex Education*.

debates have publicized new, controversial sex education topics like gender expression, sexual orientation, and parental rights in public schools. Yet this history of eugenics and sex ed has revealed that some of the more dangerous and insidious battles over sex education are perhaps still to come, especially as the increased availability and high costs of gene editing and reproductive technologies raise new ethical questions about how to teach gender, reproduction, heredity, and genetics in public schools.

**Julia B. Haager** is an assistant professor of History at Western Carolina University. She thanks Kim Tolley and the anonymous reviewers at *HEQ* for their insightful comments and support throughout this process. This article is part of a larger dissertation/book project that was funded by the American Association of University Women, Humanities NY/Mellon Foundation, and SUNY Binghamton. Thoughtful feedback from Leigh Ann Wheeler, Wendy Wall, Adam Laats, Mario Rios-Perez, Sharon Ullman, and Campbell Scribner has undoubtedly made this work stronger. Finally, a special thank you to Diane Haager, who has always inspired my ability to think critically and fostered in me the foundational belief that words matter.

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