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In the pregnant stomach of America

Conspicuous circumstances surround deaths of babies born to irresponsible parents

Senior prom. For most high school students, this apex marks a footstep toward the future, the last big blowout before the end of an era. Normally, the worst case scenario would involve going stag or showing up in the same dress as someone else. But, as Bob Dylan said, "The times, they are a'changin'."



Columnist
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Garden Manor catering hall in Freehold, New Jersey is where the story took place. Seniors and their dates enjoyed the ambiance and mingled with friends in the dimly lit room. Melissa Drexler, 18, danced with her date and inconspicuously disappeared into the women's restroom. Minutes later on the dance floor, Drexler was again in the arms of her companion, laughing with fellow promgoers.

Meanwhile, a shocking discovery was being made by a custodial worker just down the hall. In the pristine bathroom of the banquet hall, a 6-pound, 6-ounce newborn boy was found dead in a trash bin. The minutes Drexler spent alone in the restroom have aroused a great deal of speculation. Police are currently investigating the scene to determine how the baby, who was alive during the birthing process, mysteriously died.

Unspeaking questions loom. This investigation is a haunting reminder of another New Jersey young person whose story shocked a nation. Amy Grossberg and her boyfriend, Brian Peterson, were indicted for the death of their newborn earlier this year.

Both of these accounts should be unthinkable today. After all, there are viable options to having an unwanted child. Teenage parenthood, not necessarily welcomed with open arms, is not unheard of today. But maybe being a teen parent is not the right answer. Couples across the nation await the birth of babies to adopt, and thanks to *Roe v. Wade*, even abortion is a legitimate possibility for Americans today.

But, let's back up for a second. In this age of AIDS, birth control is available everywhere. It is not as if unplanned pregnancies have to be a reality — pre-natal care can be taken. Dozens of contraceptives currently exist on the market, including birth control pills and injectables. These devices are readily available, fairly reliable and cheap. Beyond these, there are condoms, which all sexually-active teens should ideally be using anyway. And they're easy enough to find. Simply walk into a local pharmacy; condoms are as varied as bubble gum brands.

If all of these products are accessible to the public, including teenagers, babies should not be discovered in trash bins.

Drexler's case, now officially considered a homicide, simply acts as an illustration for a more far-reaching problem. American teenagers face a conservative backlash to sexual revolutions and rebellions of their parents' youth.

Baby Boomers are rousing their minions to return to "family values." Sex is again a hushed word, and education on the subject is staunchly opposed. Parents keep their lips sealed at home, and when schools try to fill the void, parents protest. These are not exactly America's apple-pie days anymore. While family values carry some legitimate messages, these values are the ones which sparked the rebellions of yesteryear.

Yes, it would be nice to know that preaching to kids about abstinence would work. Unfortunately, this technique does not do the job. Just as kids fall asleep during church sermons and biology class, the same applies here.

Wake up, America. Teenagers know about sex. They are inundated with innuendoes and imagery from all directions. American teenagers are having sex, and anyone who ignores this reality is simply blind. This is not Donna Reed's America; this is the America of "Melrose Place," "Roseanne" and "Baywatch."

What teenagers need is real education about sex. They need to know the realities of pregnancy and reproductive choices. If they are sexually active, they need to know what a condom is and how to use it. They need to know how to protect themselves from AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases. Most of all, they need to know that sex in the real world is not as glamorous and easy to deal with as it is on television.

The conservative rhetoric prominent in our country is doing nothing but widening a generation gap already a chasm wide. Preaching about the morality of sex only makes teens feel ashamed



GRAPHIC: Brad Graeber

— it does not stop them from having sex. Being embarrassed only encourages teenagers to keep quiet and try to deal with problems on their own. When any person feels backed into a corner with nowhere to turn, desperation often is the result. When we alienate teenagers, we force them to take desperate measures.

Don't take these written words wrong, because this column is in no way advocating the actions taken in the Grossberg-Peterson case (and possibly the Drexler case). However, an individual cannot go without asking why these teens felt so trapped. People must wonder where their parents were and why they were oblivious to the swelling stomachs of these young women.

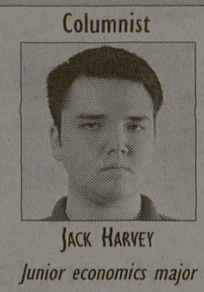
The fact that these cases are tragic is undeniable but not just for the obvious reasons. These babies did not have to die, and that is certain. These young people did not have to destroy their lives, either. Perhaps the greatest tragedy is that these teenagers felt their unthinkable actions were the only solution.

If these cases tell us anything, it is that teenagers are getting skewed perspectives on sex and how to handle its aftereffects. No, it is not comfortable to talk about sex, birth control or especially the sexuality of teenagers. Parents and educators being tight-lipped about the subject only brings about ignorance and misinformation — in the aforementioned cases, tragedy. Teens must be educated about protection and conception. It is a life and death issue. Parents teach their kids about the dangers of drugs and hanging out with "the wrong crowd," but pretend that sex is a non-issue.

If these parents do not want the responsibility themselves, they should not protest when the educational system steps in to take over. Let teenagers know that condoms are out there; provide them in the school health offices. Anything and everything must be done to ensure that tragedies such as these do not occur again. This is the bottom line: It is better to send teenagers to college for four years with a pack of Trojans than it is to provide them a police escort to jail with a life sentence.

Educational standards must improve to raise student potential

Students in the United States are doing horribly compared to students in other industrialized nations when the need to be competitive is most urgent. According to reports by the Department of Commerce, one-third of our gross domestic product is related to foreign trade, and our trade deficits are higher than they have been in the history of this nation. With the reality of international trade in this economic environment, students need to be on par with their future economic competitors.



Columnist
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A study published in U.S. News and World Report shows that students in Japan, Germany and France spend 100 percent more hours studying math, science, geography and history, and a full 50 percent of their students take advanced exams, compared with 6.6 percent in the U.S. Not only is there a higher number of students taking these exams, but their passing rate is eight times higher than that of U.S. students. Out of a random sample of 1,000 students, there would be 165 advanced graduates in the aforementioned countries, and only three in the U.S. This comes out to a 5,700 percent higher success rate. This is phenomenal.

It is astounding how the American educational system, once the envy of the world, has let itself slip into this sad state of affairs. The public school system as we know it was set up in the midst of the Industrial Revolution in order to give students knowledge necessary to work in a factory — basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. Steel mills and textile factories were sufficient in the past, but in today's manufacturing world of computers and jet aircraft, a more advanced education is required.

Not to be critical, the three R's still are very important, but simply not enough. The problem lies in the fact that, although the world students face upon graduation has changed drastically in the past century, the public school system has not. Most high school graduates have difficulty balancing their checkbooks, and the good-paying manual labor jobs of our parent's generation do

not exist today. "Joe Graduate" is left high and dry. The reason all this has been allowed to occur is hard to pinpoint, but a few ideas come to mind. Some assert that what is needed is an infusion of more money into the system. Hogwash. Statistics from the Department of Education show that, combining primary and secondary spending, per-student spending in the US is 45 to 67 percent higher than the international competitors who surpass us in performance. Perhaps the distribution of money is a bit skewed, but that is another matter — the money is out there. If the parents knew how badly their children compare to peers in other countries — and how the resources are available to change this — something would get done. It is puzzling that most students in the U.S. do not receive the sort of tests which would let a parent know where his or her child stands with the children of the world. This is yet another example of a self-serving bureaucracy trying to save its own hide. Many are proposing officials wire schools into "the Net," that incredible invention which millions

of pubescent students use for "self-exploration" of their sexuality. The money spent on computers and Internet service for each desk would be better spent on improved classrooms (i.e., no leaky roofs) and advances in the salaries of teachers, who are among the lowest paid in the industrialized world. Sure, the Internet is a wonderful medium for the free flow of thought and ideas, but high school students need to learn geometry and physics. These things can be taught best by a human being who can interact with students and understand what they are going through. A computer cannot understand the fear and confusion of not knowing what is going through a teacher's head, nor can they understand the thrill and exhilaration of that moment of enlightenment, that moment of perfection when an idea becomes clear and real to a student. A revolution in education is needed for the United States to catch up with the rest of the world. The answer, however, cannot be found in computers or standardized tests. Educating America only will be achieved through dedication to teaching our children to excel and achieve



MAIL CALL 'Sexual perversions' provoke evaluation

In response to James Francis' June 23 column:
I think you might have a different opinion if you had been forced to write a column outlining the positive and negative aspects of your argument. The fact that sexual acts are considered a perversion in this country is a testament to the fact that we are ignorant, not directed toward our ineptitude at dealing with society's ills. You point out that the placement of Adult Video is possibly inappropriate, but I must ask you where it would be appropriate. No children have any cause

to be in that area, unless they have started staying at the La Quinta or renting U-Hauls. Are you implying that the store be moved to a seedier part of town or would you rather it be located in the traditional highway setting where newcomers to this area would be greeted by a truckstop environment of pornography? And as for the advertisements, I have to ask you this: If the American society did not want those advertisements on the air, don't you think they would change them? The facts show that market forces drive market decisions. If the demand was removed, so would the supply. As a business person, you provide what people want. As for trying to change the view of sexuality being labeled taboo on television and print media, I ask you to get some reference materials about sexuality in European countries. It is a proven fact that fewer deviant, sexual acts occur when sex is not considered perverse. I will conclude this letter by offering a simple statement: If having sensual or sexual innuendo become mainstream helps to

prevent another one of my friends from being raped (statistics show that one in four college students are raped), then I will do everything I can to make sure that the American public gets "exposed." Thank you for your column and I hope insight might be raised by a fruitful discussion and examination of both sides of this argument.
Rachel Preston
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