

# The Next Frontier: Comprehensive Sex Education in the Post-Roe Era

*Panelists: Amy Littlefield, Jaclyn Friedman, Cecilia Espinoza*  
*Moderated by Koki Mendis*

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**Koki Mendis:** Thank you for joining Political Research Associates today for our first discussion in a series of the Rights—on the Right’s steady capture of the center. Today, we will be reflecting on right-wing organizing against comprehensive sex education in our contemporary post-Roe era.

For those of you who are new to PRA or Political Research Associates, we are a social justice research and strategy center dedicated to blocking the advance of oppressive, anti-democratic movements and to building a just and inclusive democratic society. Over the past four decades, PRA has researched, monitored, and publicized the agenda and strategies of the U.S. and global Right, revealing the powerful intersections of Christian nationalism, White nationalism, and patriarchy. PRA produces investigative reports, articles and tools; publishes the peer reviewed magazine *The Public Eye*; advises social justice movement organizers; and offers expert commentary for local and national media outlets. Our core issue areas span reproductive justice, LGBTQ rights, racial and immigrant justice, civil liberties, and economic justice.

On the precipice of our new five year strategic plan, we are entering a period of increased investment in growing our organization and achieving our vision. We’re really excited to dig deep with our partners, to contribute more fully in national conversations, and help sustain and grow the Left’s social justice movement in this critical moment. We invite you both on the panel and in our audience today to think about getting involved with PRA: write for us, connect your organization to ours, and join us in our work. Our webinars are just one way to engage with PRA.

That said, we are deeply grateful to you, our audience, for joining us, and we are particularly grateful to be joined by three incredible thinkers, advocates, and practitioners working in reproductive justice, when this work is more important than ever. We are honored to be joined by [Amy Littlefield](#), Abortion Access Correspondent for [The Nation](#); [Cecilia Espinoza](#), the Associate Director

of Access at [IPAS](#); and [Jaclyn Friedman](#), a writer, educator and activist and the Founder and Executive Director of [EducateUS: SIECUS in Action](#), which is an advocacy organization working to build a national movement of sex ed voters.

Thank you so much to our esteemed panelists and to you, our wonderful audience for joining us today. Please note the webinar will be recorded and the recording, along with a transcript, will be distributed by email and on our website in the next few days. Audience members, feel free to introduce yourself in the chat so we can see who all is with us. We encourage you to use the chat, to engage in the conversation, and also expect the chat to remain free from rhetoric that may be harmful to our panelists and attendees. With housekeeping notes out of the way, let's go ahead and get started.

Today, we're going to get started by taking stock of our current moment. When we describe the sociopolitical—oh, I'm just hearing our chat is disabled. That is a leftover from our more controversial previous webinar. Apologies. Please feel free to use the Q&A function for questions and we will connect in our next webinar with you all.

As I was saying, today when we are describing the sociopolitical context of contemporary reproductive rights and health care in America, what do we mean when we say post-Roe? What is the status quo of sex education in the U.S. and the fight on the Left to establish universal, universal comprehensive sex ed or CSE? Then we'll transition to a discussion of where the Christian Right is focused in the aftermath of Roe, both in terms of abortion and CSE access. And how these struggles over reproductive rights relate to the culture wars being fought in our schools. Thinking about CRT, anti-LGBTQ, anti-trans advocacy, separation of church and state. We have a big conversation ahead of us, so I'm going to start us off with our first question, which is a broad one. But at a glance, in the wake of Roe being overturned, how has the landscape of anti-abortion advocacy shifted? Where are the major arenas of struggle now and moving forward? I would like to start with you, Amy, as someone who has covered abortion significantly over the last few years.

Your audio is not coming through. Is anybody else having that experience? Yeah. Despite being unmuted. We're going to give you a minute and I'll start with you, Cecilia. Yeah, we can hear you now, Amy. Oh, no, it's gone again. Unfortunately, we can't hear you. I'm going to give you a few minutes. Cecilia, do you want to take us away with us this answer?

**Cecilia Espinoza:** Yeah. Thank you, Koki and thank you, everyone. So first, I just want to acknowledge that my colleague Paige Logan, was invited to this panel. So I'm honored to be here in representation of her and her work also around comprehensive sexual education and obviously abortion advocacy.

But, you know, basically, as I mentioned, you know, this is a very broad question because there's different elements that influence this. But I think that—I don't think that necessarily the landscape has shifted or changed. I just think it's like...it has like basically given the anti-choice movement, you know, like a platform beyond their traditional audiences. I think that the change of this, you know, that happened with the SCOTUS decision, is also basically offering like a...a precedent to other countries on you know, like how rights that have been, you know, in existence for many years can be you know, eliminated. So, you know, it's definitely something that we have to take into account as, you know, as we work and in the broader movement.

I think that there's different like specific issues in the U.S. that we need to definitely pay attention. But, you know, right now I think like the main battle it's at the state level because obviously the different organization activists, movements, are trying to preserve the services that are still available especially you know like the midterm elections are definitely constituting a challenge in many states, including in in North Carolina, where I'm based, where we can see, you know—we are having a lot of concerns about like what it will happen in the 2023 legislature. So you know we—I think that—the anti rights movement is basically very empowered. The progress that they have done on their side in the United States and they're basically learning from each other across states and so it requires a very coordinated and strong resistance from like organizations in the RJ movement in general.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Cecilia. I really appreciate you bringing also the international lens in right at the beginning of our discussion. And, you know, sort of, the midterms, I think, are on all our minds at the moment. Amy, let's test your audio.

**Amy Littlefield:** Am I here now?

**Koki Mendis:** Yes, we can hear you.

**Amy Littlefield:** I've been silenced by AirPods, so I apologize. So thanks so much for including me in this conversation. I mean, I think it's important to keep in mind that the end goal of the anti-abortion movement, for half a century or more, has always been fetal personhood, has always been enshrining the rights of the fetus either into the Constitution through a constitutional amendment or through a nation wide ban. I mean, we got a hint of that this week when Lindsey Graham went ahead and said the quiet part out loud and introduced a 15 week abortion ban, even though, of course, the anti-abortion movement

has been disingenuously claiming that they're returning the issue to the states. And so even though that's the end goal, I think we're going to continue to see that the strategy is incrementalism and that the battleground when it comes to abortion access and all of the other issues you are talking about, whether it's trans rights, sex education, it's going to be in the states, in the cities, and in the counties. It's going to be local.

And the reason for that—one reason for that, right, is that the anti-abortion movement understands that the majority of people support legal abortion. The majority of people—I mean, I haven't examined the polling as much on some of the other issues we're talking about, but I would imagine—when it comes to sex ed to right, the majority does not have an extreme position against sexual education. Right? And so the question for the anti-abortion movement has always been about how to circumvent the democratic process. And they have been very successful in doing that at the state level, at the city level, using a combination of gerrymandering and voter suppression. And the assumption that, especially when it comes to school board meetings and city council meetings and state legislatures, there aren't a whole lot of people watching.

And so, you know, if people don't know something's coming up for discussion or they don't know that there's an election, which, again, is what Republicans in Kansas were banking on when they tried to amend the Constitution there to repeal the right to abortion. They thought, well, it's a primary, no one's going to show up. And it turns out people did show up and they showed up in force. And so, you know, democracy won the day.

So I think, you know, what I'm going to be carefully watching, in addition to state legislatures are city councils. Like let's remember that the end of Roe began in Texas. That was the first state to implement a six week abortion ban even before Roe was overturned. And it happened through this private bounty hunter enforcement mechanism where, you know, neighbors sue neighbors to enforce abortion bans. And that was pioneered at the city level. That was pioneered by ordinances passed in cities across Texas from, you know—initiated by Mark Lee Dixon, this activist who drove around to city council meetings in Texas, getting them to pass ordinances declaring abortion to be murder. I think that is sort of the most honest expression of where the anti-abortion movement is headed. And honestly, that's sort of the harbinger. We saw at first at a city level, then at the state level, and now we're beginning to understand much more deeply that the plan is a national ban.

And just to end on a good news note, the fact that the cities in the states are the battleground like that can be a good thing, too, right. So the New York City Council in a most recent victory announced it was going to allocate \$1 million in funding to support access to abortion. So there's lots of victories being won at

the state and city level as well.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Amy. Thank you both for encapsulating a lot in a pretty short time. You know, I want us to set the stage with abortion, post-Roe and where these battles are being fought so we can find the corollaries when we're thinking about comprehensive sex ed. And then sort of continuing in that vein, you know, in the past several years, much of the national conversation when we talk about reproductive health care has been focused pretty acutely on abortion access as we've watched the steady erosion of nonpartisanship in the Supreme Court and the rise prominence of those in vocal opposition to abortion access—as you mentioned, Amy, the minority of Americans—but as a corollary, comprehensive sexuality education once loomed large in American discourse. I remember a time when CSE was making news on a daily basis and was a central struggle for robust reproductive rights in healthcare. So I'd like to hear from you, Jaclyn. What does the landscape of contestation around comprehensive sex ed look like today? What is the status of CSE and public schools nationwide? We know that the anti-abortion is a minority view of Americans, both religious and non. What do we know about the pervasiveness of anti-CSE sentiment and the mobilization among the U.S. population? Again, big question. So take your time with it, but really interested to hear.

**Jaclyn Friedman:** Thanks. Yeah. And thanks to you for this forum and to my panelists for all the incredible work that they're doing and for setting the stage. I'll answer the good news question first. We know poll after poll, every poll shows that sex education in public schools is incredibly popular across the board throughout the country. Bigger numbers than abortion. You'll get disagreement when you get down into talking about the younger grades. And that's something that we can talk about, because actually some of what's taught in the younger grades is the most crucial in terms of preventing child abuse and other things. But across the board, in principle, Americans want quality sex education and relationships education taught in public schools. 80, 90%, depending on how you're slicing and dicing the public polling. Where that tends to fall down is that most people aren't prioritizing it as a political issue. So it's one thing to say, to a poller, yeah, we should have that, but when they go in to vote, it's not on their mind, candidates are not being asked, by and large, to take a stand on it, in the last few years. But that's shifting now because the Right has really focused in on it, right, as part of their attempts to destabilize our system of public education in this country, because their project is ultimately an anti-democratic project and because public schooling is a huge pillar of democracy.

And so we saw it start with sort of anti-masking and anti-vax at the school

level, and then we saw the attacks on CRT, and now Christopher Rufo, who was of course, the architect of the attacks on CRT, is explicitly trying to create controversy at school district levels about gender and sexuality education. So that includes the sort of Don't Say Gay or Trans type legislation that we saw in Florida as well as—Yes, absolutely. Koch funded moral panic, 100%—as well as attacks on relationships and sexuality education. So it is an issue now whether or not we're ready for it, and mostly we are not ready for it.

I can say that EducateUS, we spent the summer, or part of our summer doing the first ever research that I could find on what moves people to action for public school sex education as opposed to just public support polling. Like 'do you support' is a different question than 'will you vote for a sex ed candidate, will you post about this on social media, will you call your legislator about a bill?' And we have learned a lot from that research. We're about to release a report on that. But I can give you a preview. In our Speaking Up for Sex Education Guide, the messages that we found that are successful are now in that guide.

So there's a big chance to shift the narrative here. And this isn't exactly what you asked. But I really want to make this pitch because I saw a question about it in the chat already. The big challenge of the narrative is that on the Left we have mostly talked about sex education in ways that cede a lot of ground to the Right, right? The messaging around sex education, even when it's on the table, when it's in the conversation, has been, oh, of course, we don't want kids to have sex, but we should really do this so we can reduce teen pregnancy and HIV transmission, which, A, can be a very re-stigmatizing message for kids who may be pregnant or have an STI; B, doesn't speak to parents because most parents think, oh, my kid is not going to have sex, and so I don't need to worry about those things; and C, the most important thing is we're missing out on the opportunity to make a bold argument for the social change that can come with universal public sex education, which is that it reduces child abuse, that it reduces bullying and harassment in schools, it makes kids more likely to stick up for each other if they see bullying and harassment, it reduces patriarchal beliefs and values, increases LGBTQ acceptance, it even increases academic performance, right? This is a big, juicy social change public policy that we should really see as core to the progressive project, but instead, most of the time we're repeating the Right's framework with just a little tweak.

And so we're losing on this issue right now. 100%. Because there's a ton of money, funding organizations like Moms for Liberty that are acting like they're grassroots, spontaneous organizations, just moms showing up at school board meetings. And because we don't have the infrastructure right now on the Left to show up when they're showing up, to know when they're showing

up, until the crisis has already spiraled out of control, that's something that EducateUS and other orgs are right now scrambling to figure out how to build that infrastructure. But I do believe that actually because of the support public polling, that if we can get the Left to care about this issue, we can shift the salience on this issue, we actually make this a wedge issue for us. That's more than you asked.

**Koki Mendis:** Well, that's excellent. I like that you also gave us a blueprint for moving forward, which is a throughline I'd love to keep in this conversation. Combining sort of our last two mini conversations into one, I'd be interested to hear from all three of you the ways in which access to CSE, comprehensive sex education, and access to abortion are related, intertwined, mutually constitutive, not just in terms of sort of the Right as an amorphous blob, but who on the Right? Funding on the Right? Where is the—sort of you started to you touched on this, Jaclyn, sort of what the narrative on the Right is around CSE. Where is the interrelationship between the counterproductive ways that we as a society writ large talk about CSE? How does that relate to the way that the Right has framed the issue of anti-abortion as well? And I'm also really interested in some of the infrastructure piece that all three of you touched on at this point, sort of the vast social movement that has brought us to this point in the anti-abortion movement. How can it be, and how is it being mobilized against CSE? So who would like to take this question first? Go ahead, Cecilia.

**Cecilia Espinoza:** Yeah, I can start. One thing that I want to mention just to echo what Jaclyn was saying before me, is that the anti-rights movement has actually been doing a good job in connecting these different issues. And this is not something we have done well on on our side of the spectrum. We continue to work, not only in the United States, but also internationally, in silos. And I think that that's where the opposition has been very, very strong. And we see how they have basically bring as their priorities like attacking any progress related to SRHR, to sorry, abortion, a comprehensive sexuality education, and science in general.

And I also want to like just mention how something that Jaclyn was was mentioning about like how also they have been very good at the community level. You know, it's like we seen more and more anti-rights activists in the United States taking part of like the school boards, the city councils, you know, different associations or organizations at the local level. Well, we, you know, are too busy maybe with other spaces that, you know, in some way are not directly affecting the content, and also like the way that the school system is basically ensuring that children and youth are going to have access to human

rights, space, and gender transformative education.

So you know, I think that, also with the changes that just happen, you know, in terms of abortion, we can definitely see this as an increase on, or maybe a reduction on the access of information that adolescents are going to have around like abortion, or even like how to access to an abortion service. Because of the increased stigma that can generate, or the fears even from teachers or other people in their communities to share information about abortion, especially in the states that are already in, you know, increasing the restrictions and basically banning abortion at the state level. So I think that, this is also a reminder on like how much attention it requires, like, you know, at the county level, like what are we doing at the county level, where we know that basically they have a lot of like influence on like content, how the system is organized, what books children have access to and other like services including like, you know, access to evidence based content and or even other important programs and related to like arts or, you know, LGBTQ rights, etc. So I think that, we really need to, you know, increase like the awareness around this is, so as a movement we are able to come together and also work at the local level.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Cecilia. There's nothing the Left loves more than a silo. I appreciate again, the blueprint to move beyond that. Amy came off mute. Would you like to—

**Amy Littlefield:** Yeah, I think. That's so true what Cecilia said about the silos, that I'm even like seeing it emerging in this discussion where I'm hearing Jaclyn say sex education can be a wedge issue for the progressive or Left side, and I'm like, wait a minute. I literally made that same argument about abortion. Like, abortion is the wedge issue that's going to like open the floodgates to, you know, social justice for all. And like, it has to be a comprehensive vision of reproductive health and justice. Like, somehow that has to be the wedge. And I think that's something that the Left often struggles with. That because their right to access abortion has been in crisis basically since it was won in 1973, because we've been operating in a perpetual state of crisis, I think often there's been this defensive posture of, "oh, we're losing, we're losing, we're losing," And a focus on abortion that has not—that has hindered this sort of proliferation of a comprehensive vision of bodily autonomy.

Which is not to say that vision doesn't exist, right. Reproductive justice gave us this framework many years ago and articulated a sweeping vision of economic and racial and sexual rights and justice. But has the Democratic Party always embraced that vision? Certainly not. Have the best funded organizations within the movement embraced that vision? Not necessarily.

Whereas I think Cecilia is right, that if you look at what the other side is doing, I mean, I've been attending a lot of anti-abortion conversations and spaces leading up to, and after the Dobbs decision, and at any anti-abortion event you go to these days, you're going to hear them talking about comprehensive sex education as this like this scary boogeyman. You're going to hear them talking about critical race theory. You're going to hear them talking a lot about gender ideology and transgender kids and that being a sort of next battleground.

So they see no separation in those issues. They say see it all as part of this terrifying assault by the Left. I mean, if only we are as powerful as they think we are. And so I think—I mean, I believe that the Left is powerful, but, I mean, in terms of the amount of political capital—and so I think that's absolutely true that the sort of defensive position that the abortion rights movement and the reproductive justice movement has been forced into, particularly because of a longstanding failure by Democratic leaders to really forcefully defend these rights, and to see sex education, and LGBTQ rights, and abortion rights as winning political issues that they are, has sort of hindered the ability to articulate a sweeping vision that would be very popular, and that might open the door to a range of long overdue economic and racial and social justice reforms.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Amy. I think we see a bit of a parallel there with the Green New Deal, right? Like, how do we present, sort of, platforms that are more holistic and maybe harder at first glance to take in, but much more compelling in the long run? I think that's absolutely the corollary for reproductive justice. Jaclyn I saw that, so I want to hear your reaction to Amy.

**Jaclyn Friedman:** I was actually going to say exactly what Amy just closed with, which is one thing that unfortunately the issues have in common is that Democrats are chickens on them, and are refusing to make the argument. And that's I mean—that's how we got where we are on abortion. Right? Abortion is a wedge issue that we could be using, but when we don't use it, it gets used against us. And sex ed is literally the same dynamics, right, that we're seeing right now in New Jersey. There's a whole free for all. I won't give you the whole history of it, where the Right's flipping out about some standards that were improved two years ago but are just being implemented now because of the pandemic. And the Right is—the people flipping out on this are a clear minority in New Jersey, but the Democratic leadership is absolutely running scared from this issue instead of looking around the room and counting and saying, like, yeah, we stand behind these standards, the standards are good, and they're based on evidence and policy. And kids in New Jersey deserve a great

education. You know, there's great effective messaging they could be using, but they're running scared.

I do think that's, in part, because we're still run by a White patriarchy in this country and that this issue genuinely makes some of the men in power kind of squeamish. I don't think that they, in their guts want to fight for it. So that is—yeah, but honestly, they would be reelected. They would be reelected if they fought for this. There's so much energy behind these issues. People would cheer. But they're afraid, and they don't believe it in their own guts. And I would also say that, you know, one of the things I say about the connections between abortion and sex education is that—just to think about what if the Supreme Court justices had a good sex education would like...they wouldn't have made...they would understand how our bodies work, for god's sake, right? And the Right understands that, right? The Right has understood sex education as socially transformative for decades, which is why they have worked so hard to fund abstinence propaganda instead of sex education in public schools. And so it really is a question of us catching up on sort of the power of this issue and really putting our whole foot in it.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Jaclyn. I think you've all really touched on sort of the intersectionality at stake with CSE and abortion access. And I wanted to give us a minute to stick with sort of the discourse, both on the Left and on the Right, thinking a little bit about what is currently meant by CSE, comprehensive sex ed, and the the opportunities that exist to make these connections stronger between racial justice, gender justice, economic justice, sort of reproductive justice, which encompasses all writ large, within comprehensive sex ed. Jaclyn, can you tell us a little bit about the status quo of comprehensive sex ed in the U.S. and areas for improvement, you know, rather than assume it is, you know, ready to go and be deployed and used as a wedge issue and applied. Are there areas for improvement?

**Jaclyn Friedman:** I mean, of course there are. Absolutely. I will say you'll notice that I don't use the term comprehensive sex ed, although it is a term of-understood inside the field. And I do that because Planned Parenthood found in a 2017 study that if you modify sex education with literally anything, it's less popular than if you just say sex education. I tend to say relationships and sexuality education, so people understand it's bigger than just literally sex, because I think that's part of our issue. But I don't modify it with comprehensive because I also think comprehensive, and this is just me, sometimes makes people who don't understand the issue freak out and think like, "Oh, we're going to be real comprehensive with our sex ed." We're really talking about all

this stuff with your kindergartner. So it's fine for folks who use CSE, but I also wanted to share why you won't hear me using it unless I slip up, because it's a habit that's hard to break.

So...state of the art relationships and sexuality education in public schools, the sex ed standards that are put out by SEICUS, really are broke down into three basic buckets. There's the elementary school curriculum, there's middle school curriculum, there's the high school curriculum. So many people are afraid to even say the word sex because we've had such terrible sex education. We also have this generational problem that we need to break. Elementary school sex education is focused on bodies and boundaries, right? Like this is your body, these are the names for their parts of your body, this is your rights to your body, but also everybody else's rights to their body. This is basic gender identity and sexual identity. So like, if there's stuff going on with your classmates and your friends, your parents, you understand what the basic vocabulary is. There's no actual sex in sex education in elementary school, which is part of the reason I say relationships also, it's about how to speak up if somebody is crossing your boundaries, right? And the basics of consent.

In middle school, sex education looks like puberty education. What is going on with my body? And the beginning of actual sex education, right? But with an eye also to abuse prevention and also starting to really build some healthy relationship skills and emotional literacy skills. And then in high school, you have a much more robust and frank discussion. Generally, the standards require that sex education be gender inclusive and inclusive of all LGBTQ identities and affirming of them, and that they teach about consent, that they teach about healthy relationships, that they teach about disease prevention and pregnancy prevention and all the stuff that we expect will be in there. But that really what we're talking about is teaching young people how to love and be loved. And how to interact with their body and other people's bodies in healthy ways.

I would say my number one wish list for how we could make that curriculum better across the board is to make there a more explicit racial and anti-racist analysis inside of it, and a much more robust conversation of how sexuality and sexual experiences and identities are different across racial lines because of racism. That is not something the Right is going to want to hear. But if you're asking me how we could make it better, that's the top of my wish list.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Jaclyn. That was a very comprehensive overlook of relationship and sexuality education. And I appreciate that note on language, it's, as we know, so important to politics. Cecilia, do you want to chime in here, too?

**Cecilia Espinoza:** Yeah. And I really appreciate what you were saying, because at the international level, there's also a lot of discussion around like sex-comprehensive sexual education and how there's a lot of resistance and also opposition to the term in different countries. And, you know, as I was mentioning before, like, the opposition is really good at bringing together, you know, different issues that are highly stigmatized, like, you know, CSE, abortion, LGBTQ rights, HIV, etc.

So I also think that this goes beyond what we know about CSE, or what we know about sex ed. It is about like quality education in the United States, because I think, like, the attacks that have existed for decades, this is not something new, but it's basically like, you know, focused on like a critical race theory, you know, CSE, just evidence based science. Like, you know, also like this idea that, you know, having an evidence based education, it is like basically against like parental rights. It's like this is something that I see more and more happening, and basically where it is the understanding that parents are the ones who have to decide everything that is [taught] to kids, when we know that they should be exposed to a variety of like information and also, you know, services and other resources that are needed, you know, during the different developmental stages.

So and I think that that's definitely something that is also important to continue to see how we also identify better messaging around like, you know, parental rights, like also children and youth autonomy. A lot of like the disinformation campaigns, you know, against like gender, CSE, critical race theory, that is not only on public schools, but it's like in general in the media, you know, a lot of like the conservative media always are highlighting. So the national level in the United States, there's always this this understanding that all of these issues are bad. That the you know—that the Left or like the progressive movements are trying to basically, you know, brainwash children and youth.

So I think that this requires like, you know, broader—also—basically partnerships across movements, you know, because I think that we need to also think about it goes beyond CSE. It is against like education, it is against like rights. And obviously, the most affected will be, you know, Black, Indigenous, communities of color that are always like, you know, affected. And in a lot of cases, like, you know, public education system is their only option, you know?

I think that something that I—and this is like the last thing that will come in right now. But it's like one of the things like we've seen and that we have been tracking in IPAS is this campaign that exists out around like homeschooling. And I think that the COVID pandemic also have push a lot of this narrative because obviously I think that, you know parents could have the right to

decide if they wanted to have their kids at home or not. You know, contexts are different for each family. But at the same time, I think that the argument is not based on like children's needs because we know that children with disabilities or with different like, you know, needs can actually do better in a context like, you know, homeschooling. But at the same time, if this is not done in the benefit of the children, it is just to push their agenda, their content, and also to basically damage like the school system and reduce funding. And also a basically change the idea that we have in the United States, you know, in terms of like the right to education and the obligation of the states to basically provide this right.

We know that in the United States, we don't have universal access to healthcare, and I'm afraid that that's exactly what they're trying to do with education. That this is now going to be something, that it won't be protected anymore at the state level. And we know that we have huge risk. One, because something that Amy and Jaclyn have said is like the Democratic Party is not strong enough. They're not our best allies. I sometimes even doubt that they are on our side. And also they you know, we also have to have in mind, you know, it's like the the political context, and the Supreme Court also represents a huge risk for education in general.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Cecilia. I appreciate you bringing homeschooling up in the conversation too, as yet another front against public education. Jaclyn, would you like to?

**Jaclyn Friedman:** Yeah, I just want to echo and expand on a couple of things that Cecilia brought up. First of all, they are not shy about the fact that they want to end the universal right of public education. Abbott, right after the Dobbs decision leaked, told, I forget what newspaper or outlet, that he would like to challenge Plyler, which is the 1982 Supreme Court decision that established that public schools have to educate everyone, including undocumented students. So they're going to use undocumented students as a wedge to begin to unravel the public school system writ large. You hear Fox News commentators, these days, calling them not public schools, but government schools, that's the new rhetoric because, of course, government is suspect on the Right. And so it sounds like a handout when you say "government schools." So be on the lookout for that rhetoric. But people...I've heard numerous right-wing commentators say, like, we should reevaluate whether we actually want public education, which is code for we don't. And like I said, Abbott has come out and said that he doesn't want it, that he's going to challenge Plyler. So that's coming. I think it's coming sooner than anybody is prepared for and that keeps me up at night for real.

I will say on the parents rights tip that the most effective two messages

we found in our research this summer wa—the number one across the board against opposition messages, we tested against a parent’s rights opposition message and a groomer attack opposition message, and the one that really neutralizes, and in some cases does better than neutralize both of those attacks, is a majority rights message. Which is most parents actually want this education for their students. And then we characterize our opposition and we talk about unity and for getting our students what they need. Because the reality is they don’t have the numbers, they have the money, but they don’t have the numbers. And when we talk about parents rights, we need to make sure to bring to the fore that we really want to prioritize parents. We actually need to support this kind of education in school, as well as fight back book bans and attacks on CRT and trans kids playing sports and all of that stuff.

And the other message that rose to the floor, also what Cecilia brought up was one about student representation and how young people deserve to see themselves reflected in their own curriculum. So those are resonant messages, right? Like those are...we should not be afraid to say those with our full throat. And they do undermine opposition attacks. We are seeing, though— I saw a question about transparency, which is sort of an offshoot of the parents rights strategy on the Right. Those transparency calls are very effective. And we’re, in fact, seeing public schools being buried in FOIAs right now about all manner of things from what’s in the library and how it gets elected, to curricula, to all manner of things. And again, the idea is to make the school not tenable, right? The fact that it makes it hard to run that school is the purpose. And I just was on call with some Michigan organizers this morning who said that we should be looking out for...that they’ve started to file FOIAs about what’s permissible on the internet in public libraries or whether that’s...I don’t know. But we should expect attacks on what students can use the Internet for inside public schools as well. So they’re going for public schools from every angle.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Jaclyn. I think now all of us will be staying up at night.

**Jaclyn Friedman:** Sorry.

**Koki Mendis:** Amy. Go ahead.

**Amy Littlefield:** Was anyone here not already up at night? Just me? Yeah, first side-note Jaclyn, as you were talking about what sex education looks like, (and I’ll stop calling it comprehensive sex education, thank you for that,) I was thinking about how even though I went to public school in Massachusetts,

what I thought was pretty good, how far away my sex education was from that. Like I can remember my gym teacher in high school making us copy down all of the symptoms of all of the STDs. Like that was our class. Like fear mongering, right?

And so I think one of the things I was thinking about, as both Cecilia and Jaclyn were talking, is how much basic information is a battleground in our current moment. And I talk a lot to abortion rights organizers, to people who are part of abortion funds, to people who are doing the nitty gritty work of just getting people to abortion care in this moment, which is often like a very unglamorous and highly logistical operation, but like one of the hardest parts of their job right now is just helping people understand what the facts are. Like, is abortion legal in your state or not? Where can you get an abortion? What is contraception? It's not an abortion. How does contraception work? How does an abortion work? Like people don't understand that basic information. And that means that in this environment of infringement on bodily autonomy and reproductive rights, they're even more impaired for making meaningful decisions and seeking out information.

Like we just don't know how many people are not even seeking abortion because they assume there's a nationwide ban, right? Like some huge number of people just thought that the Supreme Court decision meant abortion is now illegal. And partly that's on the media and how we cover it, right? And I'll take partial responsibility for that. On the other hand, like the media and coverage of "this state bans abortion, here's the next crisis," like that's not the appropriate place for people to learn basic information about how their body works, and where they can seek out basic health care in their state. So yeah. I mean, it's just something I hear repeated over and over again from abortion rights activists.

And another piece I wanted to add on that parental rights component is like it's just how much the anti-abortion playbook, which is like really old and not that innovative, is just being copy-pasted into all of these other areas, right? Where did that incremental creep against abortion rights start, right? I mean, first of all, with public funding, with poor women, with the Hyde Amendment, which bans federal funding of abortion, which affected Medicaid recipients, most of them women of color, right? And with this idea of parental rights and the idea that parents should be able to reject the right of their children to seek an abortion, and this false idea that minors couldn't make those choices for themselves. And, you know, someone can be old enough and mature enough to give birth, but not to make that decision about whether to seek an abortion. I mean, that's an incredibly powerful tool that the anti-abortion movement used. And so it's being replicated again in these other areas, whether it's sex education, or the right of your children not to be indoctrinated on, you know,

the fact that there's racial injustice in this country. Like, it's just I think we're going to see that more and more of the anti-abortion movement successful, highly successful, tactics being replicated across all of these different areas.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Amy. It's...you know, I think it's really helpful to think about the ways in which the Right does deploy the same strategies again and again. You've also all given us a lot of strategies in terms of language, in terms of reframing sort of basic ideas and focusing on science and understanding as much as policy areas.

I want to transition us into continuing this conversation—I guess not transitioning—continuing the conversation with strategies that you are seeing, but also examples of coalition building and agenda alignment that you're working on in your work and that you're seeing on the Left. You know, we do know that the tendency on the Left is to silo-ize and that the tendency on the Right has been to do the opposite, and I think that's part and parcel of why we're in this moment that we are today. But there are still coalitions in development, in formation, and operation so I'd love for us to touch on what you're seeing in the field, and in the course of that reflection, you know, strategies that you're seeing as being particularly effective right now. Any first takers?

**Jaelyn Friedman:** I mean, I'm on coalition calls all the time and so is everybody at SIECUS, and we're constantly... We have a meeting every other week to coordinate all the coalitions that we're on and to share the information between them. So I do want folks to know that it's not completely silos. We're working with Equality Federation and folks in the LGBTQ rights movement, we're working with the Learn from History Coalition, which is mobilized to—originally to push back against attacks on CRT, and now it's sort of more broadly about curriculum censorship. We're working with the Survivors Agenda, we're certainly on a lot calls with folks who work in repro.

I—now that we...I should say—I don't think I said this in the beginning—but EducateUS, the c4 that I run, is only...is less than a year old. We launched last November. So we're...we're the new kid on the block, but so is almost everybody when it comes to organizing school boards and school board elections. And so I'm also in a new set of meetings of organizations that are trying to get involved in school board elections.

So there's a lot of coalition work happening. There's not a lot of resources. Right? There's a ton of great creative ideas getting floated and not enough funding. You know, I was just on a call today with a Michigan coalition around attacks on K-12 education writ large. And I was talking to somebody afterwards from Michigan Education Justice Alliance, I think is what they're called, and

she has this incredible idea to hire somebody who knows how to win school board elections, to literally coach all the candidates. That...they...all progressive candidates in Michigan, and she has still not been able to get funding for. Like we don't have—Somebody should fund that, man. You know, I'm like, I'm going to try and help her find funding because I also want to learn how that works so that we can pilot it in other places around the country. So from where I sit, the issue is not that people want to be in silos or feel stuck in silos, but that the really creative and necessary infrastructure work that we want to build as coalitions we do not have adequate funding for.

**Koki Mendis:** Yeah, thank you Jaclyn. I think that's, you know, a reality that we are often contending with. And it's a major reason why we need to move impetus from sort of Center-Left liberalism to actual Left justice, because that's where the money is. Right? Cecilia, you wanted to come back?

**Cecilia Espinoza:** Yeah, no, I agree with Jaclyn. You know, like I know I passionately talk about the silos because, you know, it's like the reality is that the limited funding, the limited staff of NGOs, organizations working on this, and the competing priorities and, you know, the need of like reacting to a lot of like the attacks that come from different angles, you know, from the anti-rights movement and politicians, it is...you know, it's a challenge. And I think—I personally think like that we need more support at the higher level, too, in the United States. I know that I have been talking about like the need of like local, county level, you know, city level strategies. But at the same time, I think that we need to start changing the narratives, around like not only abortion but also about—sorry, not only was sex ed, but also about like the right to education in the United States because, you know, it's like that is...It is not only important, obviously, for the individual lives of of children and youth, but also for the future of this country.

You know, that's like...we know the impact that student loans has on youth ability to, you know, be able to secure housing, to be able to have a better job or even like make their own reproductive rights health decisions. So we know that losing the right to education in this country is going to mean like even more, you know, discrimination, more like gaps, more inequality, inequity, more racism, etc., because we know that not like—you know, a good portion of this country is not going to be able to afford private education or have access to education in general.

So I think that we need to open that conversation beyond the, you know, the progressive movements. It is like also that—even like the private sector that I know that from the civil society organizations, we usually don't know how to

work with them. And, you know, but we also have to hold them accountable. A lot of like these big corporations that have been talking about like, you know, supporting racial rights or supporting like a reproductive justice or reproductive rights, etc. so we need to also come up with like a specific, you know, points that we also...or like asks that we have to bring to them and to the government, you know, at the local and also state, and federal level.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Cecilia. I really appreciate the emphasis on having corporations put their money where their mouth is...especially when we have this more intersectional understanding. It becomes easier to do that. Amy, I want to come to you to talk about journalism very quickly. Jaclyn, I think you had one more strategy to share with us.

**Jaclyn Friedman:** Sorry, I got all worked up about funding streams and forgot to talk about something that we know actually works, which is deep canvassing. So we have actually just secured funding to create the first ever deep canvassing script for persuasion on the issue of sex education. And we're going to be running that pilot this winter to develop that strategy. For those that don't know, deep canvassing was developed during the marriage equality fight and has been used in all kinds of campaigns and policy fights. In 2020, it was found to be 101 times more effective than traditional canvassing. It's really incredible. And what it basically means is you're having much slower, more in-depth conversations with the people you're canvassing and you're inviting them to almost self persuade, to discover what the issue really resonates about with them, and to help them move through whatever fear and resistance that they have by making a deep personal connection. And it also shows that the persuasion that happens in deep canvassing lasts nine months or longer, which is just absolutely incredible. Yeah, Arkansas—it's been...it's really an incredible tool. I came to it in 2018, here in Massachusetts, there was an attempt, a ballot measure, attempting to roll back protections for trans people accessing public accommodations. And we did a particular kind of deep canvassing called inoculation, where you show opposition messages to people and then help them move through it. So we would go to the doors and say, "here's an ad that says trans people are going to rape your kids in the bathroom and like, how do you feel?" And then and I was like, What? But it was just incredibly powerful. And because it was—it's been developed on issues around sex and gender, we think it shows great promise around the issue of sex education.

**Koki Mendis:** Yeah, if there's a magic spell for the Left, it's deep canvassing. Amy, you are going to jump in here, too, and then I'll come to you, Cecilia.

**Amy Littlefield:** Oh, I love that. I want to find out all of the things about that campaign, Jaclyn. I was just going to shout out one other example of coalition building in this area that I think is really exciting, which is the intersection between the labor movement and the reproductive health, rights, and justice movement. We're in this like beautiful heyday of labor organizing right now after a long period of deunionization. I mean, Starbucks, Amazon, and Planned Parenthood and, you know, even independent clinics are in that mix. And so I think there's a huge push by these workers to call upon the labor movement to support them in this moment, to understand that these are jobs. These are union jobs. Come stand with us. Come help defend us. If the clinic's under threat, you know, stand with—stand with us the same way you would with your union brothers and sisters in any other industry.

And what is so exciting about these unions is that the workers within them are really addressing some of those structural issues that Cecilia was talking about. They are calling out the nonprofit industrial complex and the fact that there's a handful of billionaires who fund this work and that they can withdraw their funding on a whim if the foundation changes its program officer or its priorities. They're calling out the fact that this work is underfunded and not sustainable for the workers. And they're calling out, often, the missions and saying, you know, we need to have racial justice, and economic justice, and LGBTQ rights at the core of our mission. And we're going to bring those issues to the bargaining table. And so I think that intersection is really encouraging and exciting.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Amy. It's always like I said, in this moment, really helpful to think about labor as a major source of possibility. Cecilia?

**Cecilia Espinoza:** Yeah, no, thank you. Amy, for that example. I think it's very inspiring when we...we can feel sometimes like very challenge and negative, you know, in terms of like all the...all the attacks that our work suffers every single day.

But I want to, like, mention two things. One, it is the importance of promoting and also youth leadership and engagement. You know, this is something obviously we have seen with the—I don't know if they're still have the name—but the gay and lesbian alliance I think in schools have been an example in the United States. But also we have seen, you know across the world, the work that the Fridays for Climate have done. You know it's like basically making visible like the leadership that adolescents and youth have, you know, related to to climate and social justice and economic justice. So I think that we

need more of that across the country to make sure that youth voices are also going to be heard. Because as we were talking about, like parents, parents really want their kids to have this information. Children and youth also want to have information and education about this issue. So I think, like organizations should definitely take, you know...ensure that youth engagement, and participation, and leadership is a priority.

The other thing that I want to talk about is like, you know, some of the strategies that definitely work. And I also want to echo what Amy was saying about the coalition building. And in that sense, like I just briefly want to mention a resource that we actually created in IPAS about like, you know, advocating for abortion and CSE. And you know, this is obviously on abortion because that's basically the work that we do, but at the same time, it's a tool that can be adopted, you know, for education in general and also for other areas that are critical, you know, in this context.

And the other thing is about the deep canvassing and I love that idea. You know, I have seen also some organizations in North Carolina doing that after the SCOTUS decision and I think it is crucial to support this type of initiatives. But I was—that made me to think about like the work that IPAS has been doing on values clarification. And I know different organizations also do that on abortion and other topics in the United States, but I think that is a very powerful tool to also bring awareness on different issues and intersections, you know, between like climate justice, reproductive justice, racial justice, economic justice. So, you know, most of the people, including ourselves, you know, we were sharing already examples on like how bad sexual education was or have been for us. So it's like, community members, different stakeholders, everyone, they have gone through the same thing. So I think that values clarification can be a powerful tool for different, you know, people to really understand, you know, what are like the needs of children and youth in the school system and, you know, and also the ones that are out of the school system. So we're also starting rethinking about like some of the harmful, you know, cultural norms, gender norms that we have in in in this country, you know. So I think that those are some concrete examples that maybe are useful.

**Koki Mendis:** Yeah. Thank you. I think all three of you gave us a lot of very concrete strategies. If you have resources we can absolutely distribute them to this audience, actually to the PRA full list with the recording and the transcript of this conversation. But, you know, it's...I won't say rare, but there are fewer moments in the day where we actually get to think very strategically about what can be done in very concrete steps in ways that also...that are also really encouraging. It also sounds like IPAS and SIECUS need a joint TikTok so we can galvanize our political youth.

In closing the conversation today, I want to stay with the positive, sort of, view for future action that you all have brought us to right now. But I want to know personally, what keeps you going in this work? What brings you your resolve, what brings you joy, what fuels you? You know, what helps you fall back asleep in the middle of the night?

**Amy Littlefield:** I can start. I'm just—I'm coming off of a high from covering the referendum in Kansas, where, you know, this issue of should we remove the right to abortion from the state congress constitution was put before voters. Because of the crafty way that Republicans put it out there, you know, scheduling it for a primary when there were more exciting Republican contests, knowing that unaffiliated voters were—about 30% of Kansas voters—were likely not going to show up to a primary. They stacked the deck and this was expected to win easily. And there was a huge surge in organizing from people who have not been political before, people who have been quietly pro-choice, who are suddenly, angrily, rabidly, actively pro-choice. Republican women who were like, “oh, no, no, no, yeah, this is not happening.” I just...an enormous amount of energy and momentum.

I think there's something much more significant than a blue wave. You know, everyone's focused on the midterms right now. I think there's something much more deep and sustained and slow going than a blue wave that's forming right now. And that is the awakening of the majority of people who support reproductive health, rights, and justice. Whether we're talking about comprehensive sex education or abortion, there is an enormous groundswell happening right now. I think we're starting to see that in some of the voter registration numbers among women in battleground states like Pennsylvania. But I think it would be a mistake to look just at the outcome of the midterms, because we know Democrats have not always been the best champions of these issues. And it's not the same as a straight up and down referendum, you know, whether a Democrat is able to win an election. So I just would encourage people to keep their eye on the big picture and on the groundswell that I really think is beginning.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Amy. Jaclyn, Cecilia, what's keeping you going?

**Jaclyn Friedman:** I totally agree with Amy. I would say in the last few months, I've become actually encouraged and hopeful. But I think that in the times when I don't feel that as an emotion, I really rely on Rebecca Solnit's writing in the book *Hope in the Dark*, you know, and that has really reoriented my...my approach to hope, right? That I don't wait to feel hopeful. It's nice when I feel

hopeful. I do actually feel hopeful right now for reasons that Amy described. But that hope primarily is not an emotion. It's an attitude. It's a stance. And that if we...if we act as though there is no hope, then we will each be right. And if we act as though there is hope for change, for the kinds of changes that we desperately need and deserve, then we can sometimes produce that hope. Look at Kansas, right? Like they didn't all stay home and say, "Well, it's a red state we're in. Why? Why fight this?" Right? They they acted as if, and they made it so. And so that is where I live most of the time, which is just like it's not my business whether I feel hopeful or not. It's my business about how I can produce hope today.

**Cecilia Espinoza:** Thank you. So when...I'm from Nicaragua. So I have seen it all. We are under a dictatorship and also, I personally can not even go back to my country. So, you know, when I moved to the United States, in North Carolina, there were you know, there were a referendum about the First Amendment to the North Carolina Constitution that it was about like, you know, defined in marriage only between a man and a woman. And when I moved here, I was like, very in shock that that was even into consideration because—you know, obviously it's not that I was like ignorant of the U.S. politics and, you know, a weakness in terms of like human rights, but at the same time I was expecting that I will see, you know, more progressive policies and politics. And so, you know, it's like just my experience like working internationally and also seeing like how under threat the rights are in the United States and what can happen when sexual and reproductive health and rights are under attack, it basically make me feel the urgency of like we really need to do something. Because I have seen how, you know, women's rights, reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights are negotiated just as, you know, as a political card, as an electoral, like a strategy. And after that, we're following like with you know, democracy and or, you know, human rights in general. So I think that just coming from Nicaragua, that makes me basically very committed to democracy in this country, because I know what can happen, you know? In a very short period of time. So we have to stay vigilant.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you. Thank you, Cecilia, Jaclyn, Amy. You know, I think we can definitely galvanize hope. I think we can absolutely act with urgency and then celebrate, you know, win political awakenings. There is a lot here that can keep us going, and does, including conversations like this one. So I want to really thank the three of you, for taking your time to talk with us today. I really look forward to gathering resources so that we can distribute to our audiences. And I know we're in coalition with some of the organizations that

we've touched on today, but, you know, more coalitional work the better. You know, I just again, thank you. And this has been a fabulous conversation. We've covered a lot of ground in not too long. So, you know, hopefully we'll be able to do it again.