

**why sex ed?**

# **A Parent's Guide to Understanding Sex Education in Your School**

**2017 TOOLKIT**

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# A Parent's Guide to Understanding Sex Education in Your School

Welcome! So you're interested in learning more about sex education at your student's school.

- If you've got a few minutes, we've got some important questions you can ask your student, other parents/caregivers, and your student's health teacher. Asking these questions will help get the conversation started.
- If you've got more than a few minutes, and want to dig a little deeper, learn more about your state policy and the curriculum that is being taught. We've provided some helpful checklists so you can give it a grade.
- Ready to take some action? We've got some ideas for you and can support you on your way.

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## If you've got a few minutes...

*Ask your child:* Have they learned anything about puberty, STDs, pregnancy or relationships? If so, what are they learning, when was it taught, what did they think about the information and the way it was taught?

*Ask other parents/caregiver:* Did their kids receive any information about sexual health from a teacher or guest speaker? What did you hear from your child(ren) about sex education? Did you know if it is being taught? What grade? Who teaches it?

*Ask your child's health teacher:* Is sex education taught here? What grade(s)? What topics are included?

Reflect: Were you satisfied with the answers you got to your questions? When you spoke to your child's health teacher, was the response clear that they were on top of it?

**Stay informed. Sign up here.**

# If you have more than a few minutes and want to dig a little deeper...

## **Know your state law.**

Check out the Sexuality Information and Education Council's [State Profiles](#) for information about your state's law, adolescent sexual health data and more.

Send an email to your school principal, health teacher and/or classroom teacher asking them in which grades sex education is taught, by whom, and what topics are addressed? Also ask for a copy of the district's sex education policy.

## **Give it a grade.**

With policy in hand, see how it stacks up against policy best practices using this checklist

## **Watch out!**

Some schools may use outside organizations to deliver one or more sex education lessons, serve as a guest lecturer or present at an all-school assembly. This is not a bad thing, unless that organization/individual believes that teaching about

- condoms and contraception encourages teens to have sex. FALSE
- sexual orientation promotes homosexuality. FALSE
- gender identity and gender expression is confusing when there are only two genders determined at one's birth. FALSE

These organizations/individuals may refer to their "brand" of sex education as sexual risk avoidance, also commonly known as abstinence-only-until marriage education. While there is nothing wrong with teaching about abstinence, it is wrong to:

- mislead, misrepresent or withhold critical, life-saving information about condoms and contraception
- shame, ignore or use harmful language in reference to LGBTQ students and/or students with LGBTQ parents
- promote stereotypes about gender – i.e., boys are always interested in sex, girls should say no
- promote a particular religion

## **Tell us what you learned.**

Contact us: <http://www.whysixed.org/contactus/>

## Ready to take some action?

Think what is being taught is not enough, or worse yet, harmful abstinence-only-until-marriage education, here are some action steps to take:

### 1. Know what you want to be more, better or different.

Is there a particular aspect of the policy or curriculum that you want to focus on? This will help guide your questions when you meet with your school district's administrators and health/PE curriculum supervisor.

### 2. Meet with your school's administrators and health/PE curriculum supervisor.

Share your findings from the policy and curriculum review. It is possible that some of the district's practices are not reflected in policy – good and bad. Ask questions like: What other sexual health education is being offered in the district, and by whom? What other regulations or standard practices am I missing? Is there a School Health Advisory Committee that is responsible for reviewing, updating policy and/or curriculum? Who is on this committee? What do they think would be an appropriate course of action to address concerns? Listen to understand and determine whether or not there is an appetite to do more. School district staff have a lot on their plate. That doesn't mean they should get a pass on providing high-quality sex education, but it does mean that they may need some help and/or a friendly nudge!

### 3. Attend a board meeting, bring some friends.

Whether your school district is doing a great job at providing sex ed, a really poor job, or something in between, it is important to attend a school board meeting, and bring some friends. You can call ahead of a school board meeting and ask to provide public comment or you can just show up.

Using the *Making the Case for Sex Education Talking Points* ([below/create link to document](#)) and what you have learned, provide an overview of what you think is going well, and what could use improving. Back it up with what you learned from your review of district policy and/or curriculum review. Include stories from other parents and youth. Ask for their support to work together to improve district's sex education, and health and well-being of students.

### 4. Engage youth.

There are no better advocates for sex education than young people. They know what they need and often, it is their voices that garner the most attention and action.

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**Need support?** [Contact us](#). We'll be glad to help

# Understanding Your School District's Sex Ed Policy

## What is typically included in a school district policy about sex ed?

A district level policy usually describes whether sexuality or HIV education is required by state law, content requirements (e.g., medically accurate, comprehensive, age-appropriate), as well as parental notification and consent. It may also include requirements about who is responsible for reviewing, selecting and updating curricula and professional development requirements for teachers delivering sex education – although these types of provisions are not as common.

## How do I find my school district policy?

Many school districts' post their policies online and usually include a search feature. Keyword search terms may include: sex education; human sexuality; human growth and development; family life education; HIV/AIDS; comprehensive sexuality education; school health education; and/or comprehensive school health education.

Another option is to contact your school district and ask to speak to the person who oversees curriculum for health education. This might be a Health/Physical Education Curriculum Supervisor.

## What should I look for when reviewing my school district's sex ed policy?

Component	Yes	Partially	No	Comments
1. Has the policy been reviewed and/or updated in the last 5-7 years? Is there a process outlined in the policy for how frequently the policy is reviewed/updated and by whom – i.e., parents, educators, health professionals, etc?				
2. Does the policy require content to be medically-accurate?				
3. Does the policy require sex education content be taught in multiple grades spanning elementary, middle, and high school?				

Component	Yes	Partially	No	Comments
4. Does the policy require content require instruction about abstinence as well as age-appropriate instruction about contraception, condoms?				
5. Does the policy state that instruction shall be inclusive of all students regardless of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression?				
6. Does the policy spell out how parents are notified about sex education instruction and their rights?				
7. Does the policy provide guidance about outside speakers who may be invited to deliver sex ed related content - ie., that their materials must align with district policy, be medically-accurate and meet the needs of LGBTQ youth?				

## Give it a grade:

- A+** Perfect score. All yes!
- B** Almost there. A score of 5 or 6, is a great start and your district is on its way!
- C** Average. Room for improvement, a score of 3-4
- F** If your district only has one or two of these policy components, then your district is not ensuring that young people have access to high-quality, comprehensive sexuality education.

# Curriculum Review: Taking a Closer Look

Reviewing curriculum can be a much more labor-intensive task, depending on how many grade levels are currently receiving sex education. When reviewing curriculum, it might be helpful to first look at the [National Sexuality Education Standards](#) to get a sense of topics, skills and timing.

School districts have different practices about sharing curriculum. Some will loan it to a parent to review at home or provide links to online materials. Others will require you to come to the district/school office to review.

At a basic level, you want to know:

Title of Curriculum.

Year Published.

Grade Level.

Number of Lessons.

Length of Lessons (minutes).

Overall focus of curriculum, usually found in the preface. Some curricula have a specific emphasis on pregnancy and disease prevention. This is good, however, there is much, much more to sexuality education!

Reflection Questions:

Is the curriculum published by an organization or is the district using a curriculum developed internally?

Is the curriculum current? I.e., does it included current information, world of social media and its influence on relationships, etc.

Are multiple grade levels being taught? We don't teach math one year and call it done. At a minimum, sex education should be taught in middle school and high school.

Is enough time being devoted to teaching sex education? You can gauge this by the number of grades where sex education is taught, the number of lessons, and number of minutes per lesson. Add it up. Most teens say that sex education is too little, too late. What is your assessment based on your review and the minimum content included in the [National Sexuality Education Standards](#)?



## Talking Points

- Sexuality is a normal part of human development. Young people make healthier choices and have healthier relationships when they receive quality, fact-based sex education in school.
- Comprehensive sex education helps keep young people safe and healthy—both in school and out.
- Young people are surrounded by bad information about health and relationships—from their peers, from TV, from the internet. Quality sex education gives young people the reliable information they need to make healthy decisions and have healthy relationships.
- We can't protect our kids by keeping them in the dark. If we want young people to make healthy decisions, form healthy relationships, and have healthy futures, then we need to be providing sex ed that's factual and covers everything they need to know.
- Families play an indispensable role in preparing kids for the future and should complement the science-based sex ed instruction their children receive in school, just as they might help them with math, biology, or history homework.
- Every student deserves to feel safe, welcome, and acknowledged at school. LGBTQ students thrive when they see themselves reflected in lessons and learn that it is entirely normal for people to have different sexual orientations or gender identities. Inclusive lessons create a positive effect on all students and reduce bullying, discrimination, and harassment.

## Frequently Asked Questions about Sex Education:

### **Why is sex education important?**

Providing young people with the skills they need is key to healthy decision-making.

As they grow up, young people face important decisions about relationships, sexuality, and sexual behavior. The decisions they make can impact their health and well-being for the rest of their lives. Young people have the right to lead healthy lives, and society has the responsibility to prepare youth by providing them with comprehensive sexual health education that gives them the tools they need to make healthy decisions. But it is not enough for programs to include discussions of abstinence and contraception to help young people avoid unintended pregnancy or disease. Comprehensive sexual health education must do more. It must provide young people with honest, age-appropriate information and skills necessary to help them take personal responsibility for their health and overall well being.

### **Shouldn't parents have the final say on what their kids learn about sex?**

Families play an indispensable role in preparing kids for the future and should complement the science-based sex ed instruction their children receive in school, just as they might help them with math, biology, or history homework. All of these subjects help prepare students for higher educational achievements and healthy adult relationships, including options like getting married or having a family. We hope parents discuss issues like puberty, consent, sex, gender identity, and healthy relationships with their children to help connect their studies with family traditions and cultures.

### **My child is not engaging in the types of behaviors these curricula address. Why do you need to teach kids how to have anal sex? It's all so graphic.**

Without the facts, young people often repeat what they hear from friends or find on the internet, which may

be inaccurate. This can cause confusion. Just because young people are learning about sex doesn't mean they're having it, but the lessons give parents an opportunity to have honest conversations with their kids about staying safe and healthy as they encounter a variety of circumstances throughout life. Plus, young people who receive comprehensive sex education generally start having sex later in life and have lower rates of unplanned teen pregnancy.

### **Isn't my child too young to be learning about sex education?**

Quality, comprehensive sex education curricula are designed to be age appropriate. Studies show that this is the right time for honest, factual and comprehensive sex ed so that students aren't caught off guard by their changing bodies and are prepared for healthy relationships and safe sex when and if they're ready for those steps. With tailored, age-appropriate instruction, we can help young people grow into healthier and more successful adults.

## Special Terms

**Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs**, sometimes called **Sexual Risk Avoidance Programs**, teach abstinence as the *only morally correct option* of sexual expression for teenagers. They usually censor information about contraception and condoms for the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and unintended pregnancy.

**Abstinence-Centered Education** — Another term normally used to mean abstinence-only programs.

**Abstinence-Plus Education** — Programs which include information about contraception and condoms in the context of strong abstinence messages.

**Bias free**, sexuality education presented to students should not reflect conscious or unconscious bias against gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender or gender non-conforming students. Many curricula assume heterosexuality and do not address disease prevention among same sex partners. Any kind of bias is in direct conflict with the mandate of schools to provide educational equality for all students.

**Comprehensive Sex Education** teaches about abstinence as the best method for avoiding STDs and unintended pregnancy, but also teaches about condoms and contraception to reduce the risk of unintended pregnancy and of infection with STDs, including HIV. It also teaches interpersonal and communication skills and helps young people explore their own values, goals, and options.

**Health services providers** are qualified professionals such as physicians, nurses, dentists, health educators, and other allied health personnel.

**Medically accurate**, information provided to students be “verified or supported by research conducted in compliance with scientific methods and published in peer-reviewed journals, where appropriate, and recognized as accurate and objective by professional organizations and agencies.

**School health advisory committee**, (SHAC) is any group that advises on school health. SHACs might go by other names, such as “school health teams” or “wellness councils.” Often based at the district level (though sometimes at the school or state levels), these committees are not part of the administrative structure and have no legal responsibilities. Typically, SHACs are set up to have subcommittees, each of which focuses on a particular aspect of school health (e.g., sexual health).