

TIME FOR CHANGE: SEX EDUCATION AND THE TEXAS HEALTH CURRICULUM STANDARDS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY SEPTEMBER 2019

Texas has long been the virtual poster child for abstinence-only sex education. But by the time they graduate from high school, most Texas students say they have had sex and didn't use a condom the last time they did. A substantial number report having experienced sexual violence. And the unique needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students are virtually ignored – or their very existence disparaged – in most sex education classrooms. Clearly, it's time for change when it comes to sex education in the Lone Star State.

The State Board of Education's revision of the public school health curriculum standards, including standards dealing with sexuality and health, in 2019-20 offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity for that change. The overhaul of state's health standards is the first in more than two decades. And because of the size of the Texas market, these standards could have a strong influence on textbook content in other states across the country. This new report from the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund and the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) offers a range of recommendations for what the standards should include when it comes to sex education.

A TROUBLED HISTORY

Sex education has a troubled history in Texas. In 1994-95, abstinence-only advocates demanded that publishers remove information on condoms and other methods of birth control and STI/HIV prevention from proposed new textbooks. They also objected to the inclusion of information on sexual orientation and even insisted that publishers remove educational illustrations they thought were too suggestive or embarrassing for high school health students – including simple line drawings of self-exams for breast and testicular cancer. In 1997 they objected to the inclusion of a single curriculum standard mentioning “barrier methods” of contraception. And in 2004 publishers submitted for adoption new textbooks that took an abstinence-only approach on sex education – essentially ignoring contraception as well as information on sexual orientation.

A 2017 report from the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund revealed that 83 percent of Texas school districts either taught abstinence-only-until-marriage or nothing at all when it came to sex education. Abstinence-only programs in many school districts promoted the falsehood that condoms and other contraception and disease prevention methods are ineffective, employed fear and shaming about sex as instructional strategies, reinforced stereotypes and dangerous misinformation about gender and sexual assault, and virtually ignored the presence and needs of LGBTQ+ students in classrooms.

THE STAKES

The failure to teach generation after generation of Texas students responsible, evidence-based sex education has been accompanied by startling data about sex and health among the state's teens. Six in ten Texas twelfth-graders – 62.6 percent – say they have had sex by that age, and 60 percent report that they didn't use a condom the last time they had sex. It shouldn't be surprising, then, that

Texas continues to have one of the highest teen birth rates in the nation. In fact, in 2016 the state had the highest rate of repeat births to teens – that is, births to teens who already had at least one child.

As the full report lays out, rates of HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among Texas teens are also higher than in most other states, and an alarming percentage of high school students report having experienced sexual violence. Such challenges are magnified in communities of color, which still struggle with a history of discrimination that has left them particularly vulnerable to disparate sexual and reproductive health outcomes – including higher maternal mortality rates than for the rest of the population. Moreover, a majority of gay and transgender youth nationally report feeling unsafe at school. A significant percentage say they have been victims of bullying and physical violence because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Education policies that withhold critical information about sex and health contribute to these and other challenges facing young Texans, especially vulnerable communities. It's time for change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The full report makes common-sense recommendations for the new Texas health curriculum standards in four areas dealing with sexuality and health. These recommendations are based on a wealth of research identifying the characteristics of inclusive and effective sex education.

Contraception and STI Prevention

Begin simply by teaching students in the earliest grades that all living things have the capacity to reproduce. Then in later grades, define and describe abstinence but also begin introducing age-appropriate instruction that explains how pregnancy occurs as well as information about STIs and HIV and how they are transmitted. By the end of middle school, students should learn about condoms and other methods of contraception and STI and HIV prevention. High school students should be able to compare and contrast the benefits, risks and effectiveness of those methods, including abstinence. Instruction should also cover the associated risks of sexual activity and help students develop skills for communicating with partners and health providers about STI and HIV prevention.

Comprehensive Reproductive Health Care

Middle school students should learn medically accurate information about topics such as the stages of pregnancy, prenatal development and care, and emergency contraception. High school students should learn about laws and other medically accurate information related to reproductive and sexual health care services, including prenatal care, birth, contraception, adoption and abortion.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression

School officials should recognize that their classrooms include LGBTQ+ students who need and deserve to learn in a safe environment information that is relevant to their lives and experiences. All students should learn that everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. In the earliest grade levels, students should learn that some people's gender matches what their body looks like on the outside and

others' do not. In later grades, provide age-appropriate instruction that helps students understand sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. Identify parents or other trusted adults to whom students can ask questions about these topics, and help students learn to evaluate other credible sources of information.

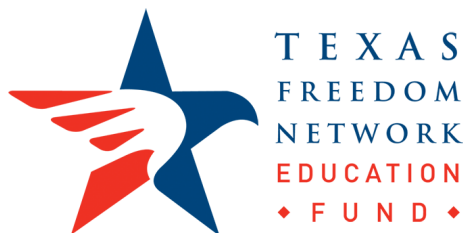
Consent and Sexual Violence Prevention

The youngest children are most vulnerable to sexual abuse, and 1 in 7 female and 1 in 16 male high school students in Texas report having experienced sexual violence. Beginning in age-appropriate ways in the earliest grades, students should learn about respecting others' personal boundaries and communicating their own, identifying parents and other trusted adults whom students can talk to when they feel unsafe, and how to clearly say "no" and leave uncomfortable situations. As students get older, they should learn about various forms of abuse, including sexual abuse, and how to communicate about and prevent such abuse. They should also learn about sexual consent (including relevant laws), the influence of drugs and alcohol on one's capacity to give and receive consent, the forms that abuse can take, and information about how to get out of an unsafe or unhealthy relationship.

TIME FOR CHANGE

The question before the State Board of Education isn't whether students should learn about abstinence. They should. But it's time for board members and other policy leaders to recognize that abstinence-only education policies are failing students. In short, it's time for change and for teaching the truth. Young people are hearing about sex much earlier in their lives than ever before – from their peers, the Internet, movies, music and the rest of popular culture. It's critical that schools help families by giving students accurate sex education to counter the distorted and false information they often encounter elsewhere. Our common-sense recommendations call for age-appropriate, fact-based instruction that gives young people the information and skills they need to make responsible decisions and lead healthy lives based on their own and their families' values.

The full report, [Time for Change: Sex Education and the Texas Health Curriculum Standards](https://tfn.org/sex-ed), is available at tfn.org/sex-ed.



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