

# The SIECUS State Profiles



## PENNSYLVANIA

### PENNSYLVANIA'S SEX ED SNAPSHOT

#### THE STATE OF SEX EDUCATION

Advocates have worked diligently over recent years to advance sex education in Pennsylvania, their most recent efforts cumulating in the introduction of a bill that sought to mandate comprehensive sex education. In 2019, Representative Brian Sims introduced [House Bill 1586](#) in an effort to require all schools to provide inclusive, medically accurate, and evidence-based sex education that, among other topics, would have required educators to provide instruction on contraceptives, abstinence, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), affirmative consent, and resources for sexual and reproductive health care. While House Bill 1586 ultimately failed, advocates have been successful in advancing sex education at the local level.

After a student [reported](#) that Amnion, a crisis pregnancy center (CPC), was providing medically inaccurate and fear-based abstinence only or “sexual risk avoidance” instruction, including comparing sexually active young women to used pieces of tape, the Wallingford-Swarthmore school district banned the organization and made a commitment to ensuring young people in the district receive factual, empowering sex education. Crisis Pregnancy Centers (CPCs), also referred to as fake clinics, attract individuals trying to access reputable reproductive health care and provide false, manipulative information about abortion care. Unfortunately, crisis pregnancy centers have increasingly received federal funding to deliver abstinence-only instruction [nationwide](#). Despite the success of the Wallingford-Swarthmore school district, the crisis pregnancy center in question continues to teach lessons at [25 other](#) surrounding schools.

Sex education is not currently mandated in Pennsylvania. Schools that do teach sex education must emphasize abstinence. Because Pennsylvania schools are not required to provide sex education to students, school districts are left to decide what type of sex education—if any at all—they provide to youth. Mandating local control over sex education presents unique challenges that have resulted in a glaring disparity regarding the quality of sex education that students receive. Such discretion allows for the implementation of policies and curriculum that stigmatize marginalized youth, such as students of color and LGBTQ youth, and presents further challenges in ensuring that low income districts have access to the resources needed to implement comprehensive sex education.

Right now, advocates can take action to ensure young people in their community have access to quality sex education. After contacting their local school board, advocates can determine what topics are missing from sex education instruction, such as instruction on consent, sexual orientation and gender identity, and contraceptives. Advocates can also increase efforts to ensure that the curriculum being taught is medically accurate and free of stigma and shame. They can then contact their representatives to vocalize the important need for advancing comprehensive sex education requirements in their community. Advocates are encouraged to use the SIECUS [Community Action Toolkit](#) to guide local efforts to advance sex education.

## STATE SEX EDUCATION POLICIES AND REQUIREMENTS AT A GLANCE

- Schools in Pennsylvania are not required to teach sex education. However, curriculum is required to include instruction on STDs, including HIV.
  - Curriculum is not required to be comprehensive.
  - Curriculum must stress abstinence.
- Curriculum is not required to include instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Curriculum is not required to include instruction on consent.
- School districts must publicize the fact that parents and guardians can review all curriculum materials. Parents and guardians whose principles or religious beliefs conflict with instruction may excuse their children from the programs. [This is referred to as an “opt-out” policy.](#)
- Pennsylvania has no standard regarding medically accurate sex education instruction.

## STATE HOUSE HIGHLIGHTS

This section highlights sex education bills that were introduced during the 2019 state legislative session as well as bills that have been introduced thus far in 2020. These proposed bills provide a brief overview of both recent and current legislative action taken to advance or restrict sex education. For a more comprehensive look at relevant legislation concerning sex education and related topics such as reproductive health care, LGBTQ rights, and HIV/AIDS, continue reading on to the “State Legislative Activity” section of Pennsylvania’s profile.

### 2019 Legislative Session

#### [House Bill 1586](#), (failed):

- Sought to require schools to teach comprehensive sex education that is inclusive, medically accurate, and evidence based.

## MORE ON SEX ED IN PENNSYLVANIA

### STATE LAW

Schools in Pennsylvania are not required to teach sex education. [Pennsylvania Constitutional Statutes Title 22 § 4.29](#), however, require primary, intermediate, middle, and high schools to teach sexually transmitted disease (STD), including human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), education. Primary schools are allowed to omit instruction on the sexual methods of disease transmission. Schools must use materials that have been determined by the local school district to be age-appropriate, discuss prevention, and stress abstinence as “the only completely reliable means of preventing sexual transmission.”

School districts must publicize the fact that parents and guardians can review all curriculum materials. Parents and guardians whose principles or religious beliefs conflict with instruction may excuse their children from the programs. [This is referred to as an “opt-out” policy.](#)

### STATE STANDARDS

The state has created the [Academic Standards for Health, Safety, and Physical Education](#), which include STD and HIV prevention education. All decisions regarding HIV prevention curricula and materials must be made by local school districts. School districts do not have to follow a specific curriculum, but they must use these standards as a framework for the development of their curricula.

## STATE LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITY

State legislative activity related to sex education does not take place in isolation from the broader embroiled political and policy climate. Attacks on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ) individuals, and efforts to limit access to abortion care and other reproductive health care services prevent students from receiving comprehensive sex education and accessing sexual and reproductive health care services. Below are highlights of current legislative activity related to these topics. Pennsylvania's 2020 session convened January 7, 2020.

### 2019 SESSION: ADJOURNED DECEMBER 18, 2019

TITLE	DESCRIPTION	STATUS
<a href="#">HOUSE BILL 321</a>	PROHIBITS ABORTION BASED ON THE FETUSES SEX OR IF THE FETUS HAS BEEN DIAGNOSED WITH DOWNS SYNDROME EXCEPT IN THE CASE OF A MEDICAL EMERGENCY.	VETOED
<a href="#">HOUSE BILL 1293</a>	PROHIBITS MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FROM ENGAGING IN CONVERSION THERAPY WITH MINORS.	DIED IN THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH
<a href="#">HOUSE BILL 1586</a>	REQUIRES SCHOOLS TO TEACH COMPREHENSIVE SEX EDUCATION THAT INCLUDES MEDICALLY ACCURATE, EVIDENCE BASED, INCLUSIVE INSTRUCTION ON CONTRACEPTIVES, STIs, HUMAN ANATOMY, BENEFITS OF DELAYING SEXUAL ACTIVITY, EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE ON DECISION MAKING, PUBERTY, "GOOD TOUCH VERSUS BAD TOUCH", RESOURCES FOR SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CARE, HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS, AFFIRMATIVE CONSENT, AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF SEXTING. ESTABLISHES AN "OPT-OUT" POLICY AND REQUIRES EACH SCHOOL TO PROVIDE PARENTS AND GUARDIANS WITH INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL DISTRICT'S SEX EDUCATION.	DIED IN THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
<a href="#">HOUSE BILL 1977</a>	PROHIBITS ABORTION AFTER 24 WEEKS	DIED IN THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH
<a href="#">HOUSE BILL 2048</a>	REQUIRES EACH SCHOOL DISTRICT TO PROVIDE REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS FOR LACTATING STUDENTS	DIED IN THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
<a href="#">SENATE BILL 21</a>	PROHIBITS ABORTION BASED ON THE FETUSES SEX OR IF THE FETUS HAS BEEN DIAGNOSED WITH DOWNS SYNDROME OR THE PARENT BELIEVES THE FETUS MAY BE DIAGNOSED WITH DOWNS SYNDROME.	DIED IN THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
<a href="#">SENATE BILL 56</a>	PROHIBITS MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FROM ENGAGING IN CONVERSION THERAPY WITH MINORS.	DIED IN THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON CONSUMER PROTECTION AND PROFESSIONAL LICENSURE
<a href="#">SENATE BILL 912</a>	PROHIBITS ABORTION AFTER A FETAL HEARTBEAT IS DETECTED.	DIED IN THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

## LEGISLATIVE KEY

SEX EDUCATION  
REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CARE  
SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER  
IDENTITY  
HIV/AIDS (THAT IMPACTS YOUTH)

## YOUTH SEXUAL HEALTH DATA

Young people are more than their health behaviors and outcomes. While data can be a powerful tool to demonstrate the sex education and sexual health care needs of young people, it is important to be mindful that these behaviors and outcomes are impacted by systemic inequities present in our society that affect an individual's sexual health and well-being. To learn more about Pennsylvania's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) results, [click here](#).

## STATE SCHOOL HEALTH PROFILES DATA

In 2019, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released the School Health Profiles, which measure school health policies and practices and highlight which health topics were taught in schools across the country. Since the data were collected from self-administered questionnaires completed by schools' principals and lead health education teachers, the CDC notes that one limitation of the School Health Profiles is bias toward the reporting of more positive policies and practices. In the School Health Profiles, the [CDC identifies 20 sexual health education topics](#) as critical for ensuring a young person's sexual health. Below are key instruction highlights for secondary schools in Pennsylvania as reported for the 2017–2018 school year.

### Reported teaching all 20 critical sexual health education topics

- 6.8% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students all 20 critical sexual health education topics in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 41.6% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students all 20 critical sexual health education topics in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

### Reported teaching about the benefits of being sexually abstinent

- 73.9% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students about the benefits of being sexually abstinent in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 95.3% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students about the benefits of being sexually abstinent in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

### Reported teaching how to access valid and reliable information, products, and services related to HIV, other STDs, and pregnancy

- 50.8% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students how to access valid and reliable information, products, and services related to HIV, other STDs, and pregnancy in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 94.5% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students how to access valid and reliable information, products, and services related to HIV, other STDs, and pregnancy in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

#### Reported teaching how to create and sustain healthy and respectful relationships

- 74.9% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students how to create and sustain healthy and respectful relationships in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 90.9% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students how to create and sustain healthy and respectful relationships in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

#### Reported teaching about preventive care that is necessary to maintain reproductive and sexual health

- 50.6% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students about preventive care that is necessary to maintain reproductive and sexual health in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 90.9% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students about preventive care that is necessary to maintain reproductive and sexual health in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

#### Reported teaching how to correctly use a condom

- 18.2% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students how to correctly use a condom in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 59.3% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students how to correctly use a condom in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

#### Reported teaching about methods of contraception other than condoms

- 59.3% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students about methods of contraception other than condoms in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 80.6% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students about methods of contraception other than condoms in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

#### Reported teaching about sexual orientation

- 26.3% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students about sexual orientation in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 62.1% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students about sexual orientation in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

#### Reported teaching about gender roles, gender identity, or gender expression

- 25.7% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students about gender roles, gender identity, or gender expression in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 66.7% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students about gender roles, gender identity, or gender expression in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

Visit the CDC's [School Health Profiles](#) report for additional information on school health policies and practices

**The quality of sex education taught often reflects funding available for sex education programs.**

**To learn more about federal funding streams, [click here](#).**