

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 efforts to reintroduce legislation to mandate comprehensive sex education.

Advocates have been diligently working to advance several initiatives concerning sex education over the past year, including efforts on behalf of the PA Coalition for Sex Education (PACSE) to advance comprehensive sex education legislation during the 2021 session. While the coronavirus pandemic inhibited the coalition's ability to host in-person lobbying events, they have been successful in hosting several virtual webinars on comprehensive sex education. Further, they have been able to digitally connect with legislatures to discuss advancing sex education curriculum. During this time, advocates have also facilitated a successful marketing campaign, #KeepRelationshipsReal, in which clients are able to learn about sexual health topics and are then directed to service providers. At the local level, advocates in Philadelphia have begun working with the City Council of Philadelphia to advance comprehensive sex education, and additional advocates in Pittsburgh have pushed for the Pittsburgh Public Schools Board of Directors to adopt comprehensive sex education curriculum. While these efforts have temporarily halted due to the coronavirus, they exemplify current efforts to advance comprehensive sex education statewide.

While the coronavirus has halted efforts to advance sex education, students and educators have faced unprecedented challenges in adapting to a virtual learning environment. Several schools have opted not to provide health education at all due to concerns related to confidentiality and changes to the school year schedule, while others have shifted their health programming towards drug and alcohol education. Efforts to integrate comprehensive sex education in several counties were also put on hold due to similar factors. Despite this, advocates report that they have been able to provide virtual sex education programming in a limited manner, and have been successful in holding virtual train-the-trainer sessions.

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.

In 2019, the Black Girls Equity Alliance released a report entitled [Black Girls and Sexuality Education: Access. Equity. Justice.](#) The report examines the reproductive health outcomes and experiences of sex education of Black girls in Allegheny County, revealing stark disparities in health outcomes and access to comprehensive sex education. The report highlights the way in which internal sex education providers at schools with a higher percentage of Black students were less likely to use a structured curriculum, increasing the odds of students receiving inadequate education. The report concludes with outlining several recommendations, including the implementation of culturally responsive curriculum, the use of curricula

designed by and for Black girls and women, and several recommendations for Pittsburgh and Allegheny County schools.

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 2020 state legislative session as well as bills that have been introduced thus far in 2021. 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.

Last Updated February 12, 2021 2

2021 Legislative Session

No bills have been introduced concerning sex education to date.

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 2021 session convened January 5, 2021.**

TITLE	DESCRIPTION	STATUS
SENATE BILL 21	PROHIBITS ABORTION BASED EITHER ON THE SEX OF THE FETUS OR IF THE FETUS HAS OR MAY HAVE DOWN SYNDROME.	REFERRED TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES (2021)
SENATE BILL 26	PROHIBITS MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FROM ENGAGING IN CONVERSION THERAPY WITH MINORS.	REFERRED TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON CONSUMER PROTECTION AND

		PROFESSIONAL LICENSURE (2021)
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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](#).