



COMPREHENSIVE SEX EDUCATION: WHY IT MATTERS AND WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

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About the Centers

The Region III Equity Assistance Center is a project of the Great Lakes Equity Center, an educational research and service center located in Indiana University's School of Education at IUPUI. The Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is funded by the U.S. Department of Education under Title IV of the Civil Rights Act to provide equity-focused technical assistance to states, districts, and public schools focused on systemic improvements to ensure educational access, participation and positive outcomes for students who have been historically marginalized based on race, sex, national origin, or religion, at the request of public schools, districts, state departments of education, and other responsible governmental agencies.



Goals

- ⇒ To explain the need for comprehensive and inclusive curricula for educating students across grade levels about sex education.
- ⇒ To consider what this kind of curricula can and should look like for engaging students across grade levels.
- ⇒ To aid educators in navigating backlash from educational stakeholders concerned about the content of school-based sex education.
- ⇒ To guide Sexual Health Educators to prioritize their own self-care as they engage in this important and challenging work.

“Comprehensive Sex Education curriculum is borne out of the idea that equipping students with knowledge will help them make responsible, well-informed choices.”



Key Terms & Abbreviations

AO/AOUM – Abstinence-Only or Abstinence Only Until Marriage, these are programs/curricula that teach that the only acceptable context for sex is within the context of heterosexual marriage and that people should abstain from all sexual behavior until after they are married.

BIPOC – Stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color

Cisgender – An adjective used to describe a person whose sex assigned at birth matches their gender identity.

CSE – Comprehensive Sex/Sexuality Education, programs/curricula that promote knowledge and skills about human development, relationships, abstinence, disease prevention, and contraception, using age-appropriate and medically accurate information.

Deadname – The name that a transgender person was given at birth that they no longer use.

Gender Binary – A way of understanding gender that is socially constructed and includes only two options for gender – man/boy or woman/girl – without considering the spectrum of gender identities and expressions that exist among all people.

Gender Expression – The way people express their gender identity; this includes clothing, outward appearance, voice, mannerisms, etc.

Gender Identity – How a person identifies based on their own internal sense of their own gender.

Intersectionality – Coined first by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to describe the compounded discrimination faced by Black women, it is the idea that multiple marginalized identities - including but not limited to gender, sexuality, race, class, religion - intersect to make people who they are and can lead to greater degrees of oppression

Non-binary – A person whose gender identity is not strictly either man/boy or woman/girl, their gender identity or expression may not match their sex assigned at birth or conform to prevailing cultural and social expectations about what is appropriate for their gender.

[Watermark image description: Books, apple and sign with phrase "Let's talk sex" on grey table near chalkboard.]



Key Terms & Abbreviations (cont.)

SBSE – School-Based Sex/Sexuality Education; programs/curricula that are presented in a school setting as part of the school’s course of study.

Sex Assigned at Birth – The sex that a person is labeled as when they are born, typically by medical professionals, often based on the person’s external genitalia. Examples are male, female, and intersex.

Sexuality/Sexual Identity/Sexual Orientation – A person’s romantic, emotional, and/or sexual attraction to other people.

Transgender – An adjective used to describe a person whose gender identity and/or gender expression do not match the sex assigned to them at birth. Transgender is an umbrella term that includes a variety of identities related to gender nonconformity.

[Watermark image description: Books, apple and sign with phrase "Let's talk sex" on grey table near chalkboard.]



Policies about School-Based Sex Education

School-based sex education (SBSE) and all of its parts have been heavily debated since its inception in the early part of the twentieth century; who will teach it, whether or not it belongs in public schools, what the curriculum should contain, what its aims are, and for whom this information is age-appropriate have all been questions of contention in creating and regulating sex education in public schools in the U.S. The effects of this debate can be noticeably observed in the discrepancies among state policies regarding SBSE.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, as of May 2022, here are some statistics about state policies regarding school-based sex education:

- 38 states mandate the necessity of sex education and/or HIV education
- 28 states require that abstinence be stressed, rather than simply covered
- 19 states mandate stressing the importance of sexual activity occurring only within the confines of marriage
- 6 states mandate that sex education promote negative information about non-heterosexual orientations
- 16 states mandate that sex education include medically or scientifically accurate information
- 7 states mandate that sex education must be medically accurate, age-appropriate, culturally appropriate, AND unbiased
- 2 states mandate that sex education cannot promote religion

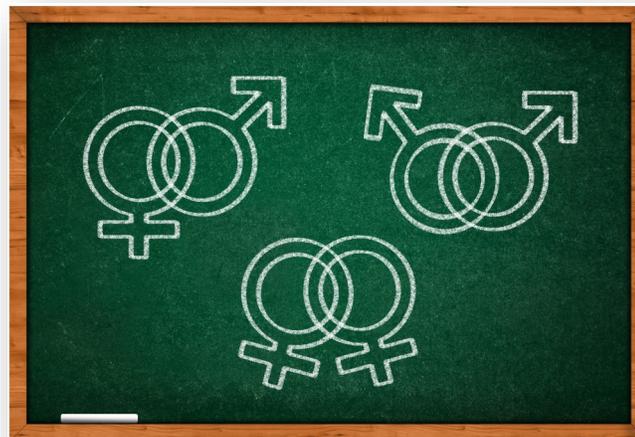


Image description: Symbols for biological sex on a chalkboard, in three pairings: male and female, two male, and two female.]

U.S. state policies about SBSE seem as varied and inconsistent as personal opinions about SBSE. Unfortunately, when educational policy is inconsistent across the country, as is the case for SBSE, it tends to result in an inconsistent distribution of knowledge across the country's population about the topic; in the case of SBSE, the inconsistent distribution of knowledge is leading to detrimental and divisive results within our society.



CSE Versus AOUM

Since the end of the twentieth century, most sex education curriculum in the U.S. has been categorized into two types: Comprehensive Sex Education (CSE) and Abstinence-Only or Abstinence-Only Until Marriage (AOUM). History tells us that this curriculum division began in part because of the AIDS epidemic¹. This public health crisis made it clear to those trying to eradicate sex education from schools that some form of sex education was, in fact, a necessary component of public education. Thus, powerful yet conservative political voices shifted their attention away from the eradication of sex education and instead looked toward creating a kind of sex education curriculum that satisfied their sense of morals and values; they created an industry for AOUM curriculum. The main differences between CSE and AOUM lie in the premises on which each is based.

Comprehensive Sex Education curriculum is borne out of the idea that equipping students with knowledge will help them make responsible, well-informed choices. There is a plethora of CSE curriculum that includes information about the benefits of abstinence, while also providing students with information about contraception and disease prevention. In 2006, Bleakley, Hennessy, and Fishbein published a study about public opinion of sex education in U.S. schools. Their study concluded that a majority of adults in the U.S., regardless of their political ideology or affiliation, favor “a more balanced approach” to sex education, the kind of approach that CSE provides². The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S. (SIECUS) reports that in 2017 and 2018, more than 82% of parents and likely voters supported instruction in birth control and sexually transmitted infections (STIs)³. Alton et al. found that even in South Carolina, a notoriously conservative state, more than 80% of people surveyed supported including information about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and contraception, as well as abstinence in sex education curriculum; additionally, nearly 70% were in favor of including sexual decision making in the curriculum, and nearly 50% supported including information about abortion and homosexuality⁴.

The topics that are covered in CSE curriculum have become increasingly more inclusive, particularly in the last decade or so; now more often than ever before CSE

¹Irvine, J. M. (2004). *Talk about sex: The battles over sex education in the United States*. University of California Press; Moran, J. P. (2009). *Teaching sex: The shaping of adolescence in the 20th century*. Harvard University Press.

²Bleakley, A., Hennessy, M., & Fishbein, M. (2006). Public opinion on sex education in US schools. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 160(11), 1151. doi:10.1001/archpedi.160.11.1151.

³SIECUS. (2018, August). On our side: Public support for sex education. <https://siecus.org/resources/public-support-sex-education/>.

⁴Alton, A. F., Valois, R. F., Olendick, R., & Drane, J. W. (2009). Public opinion on school-based sex education in South Carolina. *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 4(2), 126. doi:10.1080/15546120903001381.



CSE Versus AOUM (cont.)

curriculum discusses gender and sexuality and the strengths of our differences, rather than reinforcing outdated heterosexual, cisgender norms. A 2017 study by Baams, et al., supports the literature that CSE, when it includes information about sexuality and gender variance, may “facilitate or speed-up the development of acceptance of gender and sexual diversity in schools⁵.” Comprehensive Sex Education is based on valuing education, creating well-informed students and sexual citizens, and being inclusive, yet, most state and federal education funding supports AOUM curriculum, rather than CSE curriculum.

“Comprehensive Sex Education is based on valuing education, creating well-informed students and sexual citizens, and being inclusive...”

While there is no standard definition of CSE, what qualifies AOUM curriculum for funding is clearly delineated by Title V, Section 510(b) of the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* of 1996. In its initial verbiage, there were eight specific criteria outlined in Title V, Section 510(b) with which all programs receiving funding must have complied. In 2018, the program was renamed the “Title V Sexual Risk Avoidance Education” program and those criteria were truncated to six. They are as follows:

1. the holistic individual and societal benefits associated with personal responsibility, self-regulation, goal setting, healthy decision-making, and a focus on the future;
2. the advantage of refraining from nonmarital sexual activity in order to improve the future prospects and physical and emotional health of youth;
3. the increased likelihood of avoiding poverty when youth attain self-sufficiency and emotional maturity before engaging in sexual activity;
4. the foundational components of healthy relationships and their impact on the formation of healthy marriages and safe and stable families;

⁵Baams, L., Dubas, J. S., & Van Aken, M. A. (2017). Comprehensive sexuality education as a longitudinal Predictor of LGBTQ name-calling and perceived willingness to intervene in school," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46(5), 939. doi:10.1007/s10964-017-0638-z



CSE Versus AOUM (cont.)

5. how other youth risk behaviors, such as drug and alcohol usage, increase the risk for teen sex; and
6. how to resist and avoid, and receive help regarding, sexual coercion and dating violence, recognizing that, even with consent, teen sex remains a youth risk behavior⁶.

Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) and AOUM are neatly aligned, particularly in terms of their emphasis on abstinence, and they are exceedingly well-funded by both



[Image description: "No sex" sign on red brick wall surface.]

state and federal government.

Nevertheless, the goals of delaying sexual intercourse until marriage are not being met, according to data from the Center for Disease Control (CDC); the CDC reports that in 2019, 40% of all high school students have had sex, and 10% have had 4 or more partners⁷.

More than half of all STI cases are among adolescents. Moreover, in a study of four AOUM curricula, Lamb, et al. found that AOUM promotes several troubling ideas: objectification of both boys and girls, pleasure as problematic, girls as potential victims, and boys as having a responsibility to treat girls well. In other words, AOUM

curriculum is ineffectual and even damaging. Nevertheless, AOUM curriculum is employed in SBSE more often than CSE throughout most of the country.

⁶Title V, Section 510 (b)(A-F) of the Social Security Act (P.L. 104-193).

⁷Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019b). Youth online: High school youth risk behavior surveillance - United States 2019 results. <https://nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline/App/Results.aspx?LID=XX>



Sex Education and Race

There are additional factors, including student identities, that solidify the need for more inclusive and comprehensive school-based sex education course content. According to Kuehnel, there are racially-specific perceptions and experiences of sex that AOUM curriculum does not address, which leads to more detrimental consequences, such as STIs and unwanted pregnancies, for Black youth¹⁰. In general, AOUM has proven to be much less effective in reducing sexual risk behaviors, and - due to both federal and state funding entanglements with AOUM curriculum - states with higher populations of Black students, Indigenous students, and students of Color implement this kind of sex education instruction more often than not¹¹.

Curriculum is only one part of SBSE that is detrimental to BIPOC youth, however¹². Implicit bias and internal ideation of racial stereotypes on the part of teachers, particularly White teachers (of whom there is a majority), can prohibit BIPOC teens from engaging in class discussions or asking questions because they are “constantly on guard against racist presumptions¹³.” According to a study by Kimmel et al., BIPOC students who were dissatisfied with the SBSE they received reported that their dissatisfaction had less to do with the curriculum itself and more to do with the environment in which it was taught¹⁴. Some felt a sense of humiliation among their peers when attempting to ask questions; others cited the obvious discomfort that their adult teachers expressed in discussing the content.



[Image description: Two feminine-presenting teenagers of Color under a rainbow umbrella, taking a selfie.]

¹⁰Kuehnel, S. S. (2009). Abstinence-only education fails African American youth. *Washington University Law Review*, 86(5), 1244.

¹¹Ibid., 1253.

¹²BIPOC is an acronym which stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

¹³Bay-Cheng, L. Y. (2003). Trouble of teen sex, the: The construction of adolescent sexuality through school-based sexuality education. *Sex Education* 3(1), 71.

¹⁴Kimmel, A., Williams, T. T., Veinot, T. C., Campbell, B., Campbell, T. R., Valacak, M., & Kruger, D. J. (2013). 'I make sure I am safe and I make sure I have myself in every way possible': African-American youth perspectives on sexuality education. *Sex Education* 13(2), 176-177.



Sex Education and Race (cont.)

Overall, these young people felt that schools are failing students at providing useful sex education because of the environment in which it is given, the teachers delivering it, but also through the narrow focus of the curriculum itself. Youth ultimately want comprehensive and useful sex education curriculum taught in a safe environment by people who are unbiased and comfortable.

It is not enough for sex education to be *inclusive* or *diverse*; it must also be actively anti-racist in order to forward social justice objectives for eradicating inequity and for addressing the lives, concerns, and perspectives of all youth . Using anti-racist theory within curriculum can lead to seeing students as more than *neutral* and *context-free*, which is vital for sex education¹⁵. Whitten and Sethna outline three goals for anti-racism: to approach racial and social differences as relative to power and social equity; to analyze and understand social oppression that happens among intersecting identities (including race, class, gender, ability, religion, etc.); and to apply this analysis to the individual, social, and systemic practices in which they operate¹⁶. Sex education, in order to be truly inclusive and comprehensive, must be taught through the lens of anti-racism, with these goals in mind.



Sex Education and Gender¹⁷

SBSE has a long history of not only upholding and promoting racial stereotypes, but also stereotypes about gender and gender-roles, as well. Women are often taught that they must be sexual gatekeepers, that they are aroused less easily than men, that they think about sex much less often than men, and that they must be virtuous above all else¹⁸. These attitudes prevail in and out of the SBSE classroom in many public schools, as especially evidenced by school dress codes, which penalize and control female students far more than their male counterparts; dress codes are just one (rather common) example of the way that schools address students from a gender-biased perspective, however. Within SBSE, discussions of rape and sexual assault are often focused on how potential victims – the large majority of whom are women – can prevent these

¹⁵Whitten, A., & Sethna, C. (2014). What's missing? Anti-racist sex education!, *Sex Education* 14(4), 415.

¹⁶Ibid., 418.

¹⁷N.B. In this section, “gender” and “sex” are interchangeable terms to reflect how schools still exist in the framework of a gender binary and to reflect how schools do not make a distinction between sex assigned at birth and gender identity.

¹⁸Hendricks, J. S., & Howerton, D. M., (2011, March). Teaching values, teaching stereotypes: Sex education and indoctrination in public schools. *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law*, 13(3), 598-599.



Sex Education and Gender (cont.)

Upholding and reinforcing gender stereotypes in SBSE is detrimental to all members of our society and to the progress of society itself. Additionally, SBSE should be used not only for breaking down and eradicating harmful gender stereotypes, but also for eradicating the notion of a strict adherence to a gender binary.

In the 2017 National School Climate Survey administered by the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN), of the over 20,000 LGBTQIA+ students surveyed across the U.S. between grades sixth through twelfth, more than 46 percent of them identified as Transgender, Genderqueer, another non-binary identity (such as Agender or Genderfluid), or Unsure of their gender identity²⁴. In a study of 80,000 high school students in Minnesota, 3 percent identified as transgender, genderqueer, genderfluid, or unsure²⁵. According to the Trevor Project, in a survey of more than 34,000 LGBTQ+ youth in the U.S. between the ages 13-24, more than 35% of the youth surveyed identified their own gender identity as something other than cisgender²⁶. Adolescents who identify as transgender are at higher risk for dating abuse and sexual coercion than their cisgender peers; they experience high rates of physical, verbal, sexual, and cyber harassment at school, most of which go unreported to school staff or parents for fear of repercussions or ineffectual handling of the situation; and they experience high rates of discrimination in their schools, including being called by their deadnames, being forced to use bathrooms and locker rooms of their “legal sex,” and being disallowed from wearing clothing that is congruent with their gender identity²⁷.

Most SBSE is largely intolerant of gender diversity, and where it is not actively hostile, it is still harmful in its ineffectiveness. In a study of Midwestern transgender youth and their experiences with sex education, Bradford et al. found that SBSE was lacking in gender and sexuality diversity, both in content and represented perspectives²⁸. Participants in the study described SBSE curricula as “narrow or reductive,”

²⁴Kosciw, J., Greytak, E., Zongrone, A., Clark, C., & Truong, N. (2018). *2017 national school climate survey, the: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools*. GLSEN. <https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/GLSEN-2017-National-School-Climate-Survey-NSCS-Full-Report.pdf>

²⁵Diamond, L. M. (2020). Gender fluidity and nonbinary gender identities among children and adolescents. *Child Development Perspectives* 14(2), 110.

²⁶The Trevor Project. (2021). *2021 national survey on LGBTQ youth mental health*. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2021/?section=ResearchMethodology>

²⁷N.B. Transgender is used here as an umbrella term to include all non-binary gender identities; Ibid.; Bradford, N. J., DeWitt, J., Decker, J., Berg, D. R., Spencer, K. G., & Ross, M. W. (2018). Sex education and transgender youth: ‘Trust means material by and for queer and trans people’. *Sex Education*, 19(1), 84-98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2018.1478808>

²⁸Bradford et al., 93.



Sex Education and Gender (cont.)

and that it needs to better include the “multi-faceted aspects of sexual health²⁹.” Also, transgender students are lacking guidance in SBSE on not only the meaning of and process to developing one’s transgender identity, but also on personal safety and how to engage in healthy romantic relationships as a transgender person³⁰.

Many more young people than ever before are identifying as Transgender and exploring identities beyond the gender binary. SBSE must address the needs of all students, including, and especially, those whose gender identity falls outside of the societal binary. By avoiding the promotion of sexist gender stereotypes and openly discussing identities and perspectives beyond the binary, SBSE can be a catalyst for accelerating social progress.



Sex Education and Sexuality

In general, SBSE tends to be not only cisgender-normative, but also hetero-normative, promoting heterosexuality as the normative and acceptable way to live out one’s sexual and romantic life. In fact, there are still 6 states, known as the “no promo homo” states, whose laws and policies about SBSE mandate that, when given, it must include a negative presentation of sexual orientations other than heterosexuality. These states are Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas³¹.

McNeill defines “heteronormativity” as “monogamous, marital, middle class, and white heterosexuality” and that it is rooted in “white supremacist racial logic” which aims to concurrently regulate sexuality, race, gender, and class³². SBSE policies are fiscally and ideologically tied to welfare policies and governmental attempts to regulate populations, which are often also coded and biased both racially and class-wise³³. Garcia, in studying Latina youth, found that “heteronormativity, sexism, and racism operate together to structure the content and delivery” of SBSE³⁴. Fields describes SBSE courses as “initiations into adulthood” and as such they “hold significant social weight;” yet, particularly within schools in low-income areas with majority students of color who she observed, she found that the SBSE curricula “affirmed masculinist sexual hierarchies, desexualized students’ bodily experiences, and marginalized LGBTQ people.” Again, for SBSE to be inclusive and comprehensive, it must not be rooted in heteronormative values or expectations³⁵.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 94-5.

³¹ Guttmacher Institute. (2022, August 1). *Sex and HIV education*. Retrieved from <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/sex-and-hiv-education>

³² McNeill, T. (2013). Sex education and the promotion of heteronormativity. *Sexualities*, 16(7), 826-827.

³³ Ibid., 828.

³⁴ García, L. (2009). Now why do you want to know about that? *Gender & Society*, 23(4), 521.

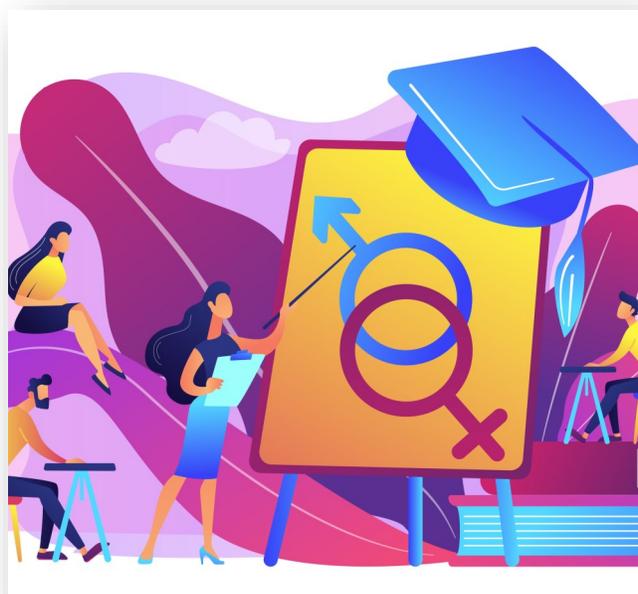
³⁵ Fields, J. (2008). *Risky lessons: Sex education and social inequality*. Rutgers University Press.



CSE Curriculum

In order to promote the institutionalization of quality sex education in public schools, the Future of Sex Education Initiative (FoSE) created the National Sex Education Standards (NSES). The FoSE Initiative is a partnership between three organizations which are all advocating for better quality sex education: Advocates for Youth, Answer, and SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change. The NSES were first published in 2012, and the updated and most recent edition was published in 2020. The vision of the NSES is for sex education to “help young people navigate sexual development and grow into sexually healthy adults” using “medically accurate information about a broad range of topics” including consent and healthy relationship practices, adolescent development, anatomy and physiology, gender identity and expression, sexual identity and orientation, interpersonal violence, contraception, reproduction, and disease prevention³⁶. This document outlines what all students should be expected to know and do at specific stages of their education, and are written “to identify the key concepts and skills that students broadly need to be sexually healthy during their school-age years and throughout the lifespan³⁷.”

The NSES as a pdf can be found and downloaded for free at <https://siecus.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/NSES-2020-2.pdf>. The National Sex Education Standards were created as a resource to help guide the creation of curricula and lesson plans with learning objectives. The creators of the NSES purposely left a lot up to the discretion of the educators, administrators, and curriculum writers who choose to use them. FoSE developed the NSES with the guiding principles and values of high expectations; functional knowledge; trauma-informed teaching practices;



[Graphic description: Feminine-presenting teacher at board giving a lesson on sexual education to students.]

³⁶Future of Sex Education Initiative. (2020). *National sex education standards: Core content and skills, K-12* (Second Edition). <https://siecus.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/NSES-2020-2.pdf>

³⁷Ibid.



CSE Curriculum (cont.)

intersectionality; social, racial, and reproductive justice and equity; and linguistic inclusivity. They are closely aligned with the National Teacher Preparation Standards for Sex Education (NTPSSE).

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has also published guidance about what to include in sexual health education. The PS18-1807 Program Guidance offers detailed and specific guidance for schools and other organizations that are implementing the CDC's Program 1807, which is an educational program aimed at reducing HIV, STI's, teen pregnancy, and related risk behaviors among middle school and high school aged youth³⁸. Additionally, in 2014, the CDC released a list of 16 topics that they believe are critical to cover in sexual health education.

The CDC's 16 Critical Topics for Sex Education³⁹

1. The benefits of being sexually abstinent.
2. How to access valid and reliable health information, products, and services related to HIV, STI's, and pregnancy.
3. The influence of family, peers, media, technology, and other factors on sexual risk behavior.
4. Communication and negotiation skills related to eliminating or reducing risk for HIV, STI's, and pregnancy.
5. Goal-setting and decision-making skills related to eliminating or reducing risks.
6. Influencing and supporting others to avoid or reduce sexual risk behaviors.
7. The importance of using condoms consistently and correctly.
8. The importance of using a condom at the same time as another form of contraception to prevent both STI's and pregnancy.
9. How to create and sustain healthy and respectful relationships.

³⁸Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019a). *PS18-1807 program guidance: Guidance for school-based HIV/STD prevention (component 2) recipients of PS18-1807*. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/fundedprograms/1807/resources/PS18-1807-GUIDANCE508.pdf>

³⁹Leung, H., Shek, D. T. L., Leung, E., & Shek, E. Y. W. (2019). Development of contextually-relevant sexuality education: Lessons from a comprehensive review of adolescent sexuality education across cultures. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(4), 621.



CSE Curriculum (cont.)

10. The importance of limiting the number of sexual partners.
11. Preventative care that is necessary to maintain reproductive and sexual health.
12. How HIV and other STI's are transmitted.
13. The health consequences of HIV, other STI's, and pregnancy.
14. The effectiveness of condoms.
15. How to obtain condoms.
16. How to correctly use a condom.

One excellent example of SBSE curriculum that strives for all the aforementioned ideals is called *The Three R's: Rights, Respect, Responsibility*. It is a series of lesson plans, curriculum content, and resources for educators teaching grades K-12, published and distributed by Advocates for Youth. Advocates for Youth is an organization that was founded in 1980 and that “partners with youth leaders, adult allies, and youth-serving organizations to advocate for policies and champion programs that recognize young people’s rights to honest sexual health information; accessible, confidential, and affordable sexual health services; and the resources and opportunities necessary to create sexual health equity for all youth⁴⁰.” *The Three R's* curriculum is available to be used nation-wide, and there is a California-adapted version, which is compliant with the California Healthy Youth Act of 2015. This policy requires that all school districts in the state of California provide students with integrated, comprehensive, accurate, and unbiased comprehensive sexual health and HIV prevention education at least once in middle school and at least once in high school⁴¹.

The entire *Three R's* national K-12 curriculum and the California-specific 6-12 curriculum are absolutely free to download and includes lesson plans, teachers’ guides, and additional resources, in both .pdf and .doc format. The curriculum fully meets the National Sexuality Education Standards, covers all 16 topics recommended by the CDC as essential components of sexual health education, requires no training (though Advocates for Youth will provide training for educators upon request), is inclusive of sexuality and gender identities, and even includes family homework activities. The three main authors of the curriculum are highly regarded in the field of sexuality education,

⁴⁰Advocates for Youth (n.d.). *About 3Rs*. <https://3rs.org/3rs-curriculum/about-3rs/>

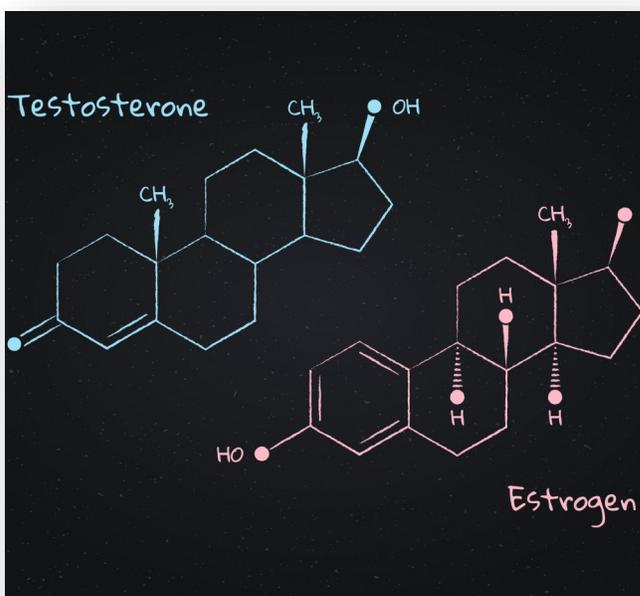
⁴¹CA Education Code Sections 51930-51939



CSE Curriculum (cont.)

and the curriculum was reviewed by a chosen panel of youth reviewers, the majority of whom are members of the Young Women of Color Leadership Council. To find out more about and download the *Three R's* curriculum resources, go to <https://www.3rs.org/>.

That said, any given curriculum cannot effectively keep up with all the information that students should receive about sexuality, relationships, gender, and identity. Sex education as an educational content area lends itself more to a teacher-facilitated, student-centered kind of pedagogy, where students discuss the content, search for information, have input, and get to be participants in their own learning. Additionally, the



[Graphic description: Testosterone and estrogen hormone structures drawn on a chalkboard background.]

content of sex education should be partly derived from students; we need to honor youth culture within sex education. Of course, sex education curriculum and content should also be medically accurate, free from religious bias, based in fact and experience, presented to students in an age-appropriate manner with respect to their developmental maturity, as all good educational content should be, regardless of the topic. Lastly, sex education content should be based on principles of inclusion, anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-classism, anti-ableism, anti-homophobia, and anti-transphobia, in order for it to be useful, socially just, and the most effective in equipping students to become

independent, critical thinking, socially healthy, and well-informed members of our society. *The Three R's* curriculum is a powerful start to this work.



Navigating Backlash

Not everyone may agree with the necessity of CSE or SBSE in general, and sexual health educators and those who advocate for them might face occasional backlash from a variety of educational stakeholders. Often, the criticism surrounding SBSE is based in an argument of either students' rights to learn, or in parents' rights to teach their children whatever and however they so choose. Both conservatives and liberals have used parents' or children's rights claims to their advantage as they see fit in discussions of education and who has the right to make decisions about what is taught in public schools. Zimmerman briefly examines the arguments of the conservatives who oppose SBSE as well as the removal of prayer from public schools. The argument for keeping prayer in schools was, for its supporters, an issue of children's rights, on the basis that if parents were neglecting religious instruction for children, then the schools would need to step in. Yet, when the same argument could be applied to sex education, conservatives were in full support of parents being able to educate their children however they wanted⁴². Unfortunately, liberals suffered the same problem. When it came to prayer in schools, those who supported the removal did not want to impinge on the rights of parents of differing religions. However, supporters of sex ed believed that children are entitled to learn about their bodies, despite parental beliefs⁴³. The nature of the controversy about sexual education in public schools often seems to rest on whose rights should be prioritized above others, the liberty rights of parents or the welfare rights of students.

SBSE was largely borne from a public health concern, the rising spread of venereal diseases. MJ Exner, M.D., in the introduction to an American Social Hygiene (ASHA)-sponsored publication from 1923 states that it is the responsibility of society to educate every individual about sex and sexuality for the purpose of each person's "fullest self-development, the enrichment of life, and the good of society⁴⁴." In many other instances in society, the right to protect the general public, including the welfare of children, overrides the liberty rights of parents and other citizens. There are a multitude of laws that exist regarding drugs, vehicles, vaccinations, and behaviors, which may be restrictive to individual liberty rights in favor of protecting the welfare rights of other citizens and the public. Lack of education about sex, sexuality, relationships, and identity are correlative to increases in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, domestic violence, sexual assault and harassment, homophobic/transphobic violence and harassment, as well as race and class-based

⁴²Zimmerman, J. (2005). *Whose America?: Culture wars in the public schools*. Harvard University Press.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Gruenberg, B. C. (1923). *Parents and Sex Education*. The American Social Hygiene Association.



Navigating Backlash (cont.)

violence and discrimination, all of which are public health and safety concerns⁴⁵. One could argue that societal public health concerns take precedence over both parents' and children's rights claims as far as both the content and existence of SBSE.

The rights claim regarding public health and safety, the progression and advancement of our pluralistic liberal democracy, and the desire to uphold our societal democratic ideals should overshadow all other rights claims regarding the existence of and the approach that SBSE should take.



[Image description: Word cloud: Healthy, knowledge, illness, HIV, education, campaign, transmitted, infection, medical, hygiene, adult, awareness, protection, pregnancy, rubber, availability, freedom, safe, AIDS, reproductive, syndrome, mental, epidemic, people, affordable, STD, responsible, bacteria, sexual health, access, contraception, decide, prevention, venereal, sensuality, physical, disease, medicine, well-being, erotic, sexually, herpes, safer, age, treatment, person, satisfying, promiscuous, virus, sex, condom, teenagers, inequality, and syphilis.]

⁴⁵Carr, J. B., & Packham, A. (2016). Effects of state-mandated abstinence-based sex education on teen health outcomes, the *Health Economics*, 26(4). doi:10.1002/hec.3315; Santelli, J., Grilo, S. A., Lindberg, L. D., Speizer, I., Schalet, A., Heitel, J., Katnor, L., Ott, M. A., Lyon, M., Rogers, J., Heck, C. J., & Mason-Jones, A. J. (2017). Abstinence-only-until-marriage policies and programs: An updated position paper of the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine. *The Journal of Adolescent Health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, 61(3), 400-403. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.06.001>



Self-Care for Sexual Health Educators

Being an educator is a demanding, difficult, and seemingly impossible job, at times. Those who teach sex education, given the controversial and deeply personal nature of the content, have an even more difficult task as educators. Therefore, taking proper care of yourself is a necessity for avoiding burnout and ensuring that you are doing what's best for you and your students. Any action that you use to improve your health and well-being is self-care. Teachers must prioritize their own health and well-being, so that they can properly be there for their students, and for themselves.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness delineates six elements of self-care⁴⁶:

- Physical
- Psychological
- Emotional
- Spiritual
- Social
- Professional

Ideally, a strategy for self-care would include activities that address each of these elements every day. Please remember that self-care is not self-indulgence. Self-care truly does have lasting benefits. Self-care is a great way to reduce the enormous amount of stress that every educator faces. Self-care practices are not a one-size-fits-all kind of thing; everyone should figure out for themselves what kinds of self-care practices will be the most beneficial.

The following is a list of activities that educators can use on their own and with their students, not only to imbue some self-care practices into their own lives, but also to teach some of these practices to their students⁴⁷.

- Reflect – journaling or group discussions are a great way to process emotions
- Breathe – mindfulness practices can help people focus more on the present moment

⁴⁶National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2008). *Self care inventory*. NAMI: National Alliance on Mental Illness. <https://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/Extranet-Education/HF15AR6SelfCare.pdf>

⁴⁷Waterford.org. (2021, May 17). *Why teacher self-care matters and how to practice self-care in your school*. <https://www.waterford.org/education/teacher-self-care-activities/>



Self-Care for Sexual Health Educators (cont.)

- Be Social – connecting with people you care about, in person or through letter writing, is self-care
- Practice Compassion – write yourself a letter or brainstorm ways of treating yourself with more compassion
- Set Boundaries – make sure to schedule into your workday breaks and an end time
- Celebrate – acknowledge moments of joy and gratitude
- Affirm Yourself – recite positive affirmations regularly
- Be Healthy – eat well, sleep enough, hydrate, enjoy nature



Conclusion

School-based sex education was borne out of a concern for public welfare, the need to lessen the spread of “venereal diseases,” now called STIs. This concern for the welfare of the general public is still the underlying backbone of sex education philosophy and should be the driving force in creating and disseminating SBSE in every state. The goals for SBSE have become ever more expansive over the last century and ever more important. Some may argue that SBSE is the most important subject we can teach in a public education system, particularly for its utility in promoting the progress of our liberal, democratic, pluralist society. Given the importance of the aims of SBSE, it stands to reason that sex education is a necessary component of public education and public schooling. As such, SBSE curricula must be inclusive, medically and factually accurate, and grounded in the ideals of anti-racism, anti-homophobia, anti-transphobia, anti-classism, anti-ableism, anti-sexism, and be free from religious bias, all for the sake of helping to educate young people to become well-informed, emotionally mature citizens, who understand what it is to create and maintain healthy relationships with other people.



About the Authors

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