



# COMMUNITY ACTION TOOLKIT

**a guide to advancing sex education in  
your community**



**SIECUS**

Sexuality Information and Education  
Council of the United States

## About SIECUS

SIECUS believes sexuality—due to its intrinsic value as well as its importance to individual and collective health—is worthy of our utmost attention, public discourse, thoughtful instruction, and societal respect.

For the past 54 years, SIECUS has made strides in ensuring young people’s positive and healthy sexual development through several different strategies thereby promoting and increasing lifelong health and well-being. To continue to gain ground on fulfilling this mission, we stand for:

- a nationwide commitment to comprehensive sexuality education in schools;
- more and better trained teachers delivering this education;
- stronger policies that support both comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health, rights, and justice; and
- a public that is better informed about sexual and reproductive health and rights issues.

Fulfilling the above objectives, in context and over time, will enable us to realize our vision of a sexually healthy world where individuals:

- Appreciate their own bodies.
- Interact with all genders in respectful and appropriate ways.
- Affirm their own sexual orientation and respect the sexual orientations of others.
- Develop and maintain meaningful relationships.
- Make informed and autonomous choices about family planning options.
- Develop and practice effective critical-thinking and decision-making skills.
- Express their sexuality in ways that are congruent with their values.
- Practice health-promoting behaviors, such as scheduling regular physical exams, using contraception effectively, avoiding contracting or transmitting STIs, and communicating effectively with partners about their needs, wants, and desires.
- Enjoy and express their sexuality throughout the duration of their lifetime.

To make this vision of lifelong sexual health and well-being a reality, SIECUS focuses its policy and advocacy work on ensuring young people receive comprehensive sexuality education that is evidence-informed, medically accurate, age- and developmentally appropriate, culturally competent, LGBTQ inclusive, trauma informed, rights-based and sex-positive.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	4
<b>Why Get Involved?</b>	5
<b>Sex Education is a Human Right</b>	7
The Politics of Sex Education	7
Support for Sex Education	7
School-Based Sex Education	8
The Other Side	8
<b>Framing Sex Education</b>	10
<b>Organizing to Support Sex Education Policy</b>	12
Sex Education Policy: Who Makes Decisions?	12
At the Federal Level	12
At the State Level	12
The State Legislature	13
At the Local Level	13
<b>Organizing in Your Community</b>	15
Working with School Boards	17
Working with Policymakers	18
<b>Messaging for Sex Education Policy</b>	21
Speaking in Public	21
Working with Traditional and Social Media	24
Writing a Press Release	26
Social Media	27
Writing Opinion Editorials and Letters to the Editor	29
Writing to Your Policymaker	31
<b>Conclusion</b>	33
<b>Resources</b>	34
Sample Letter to the Editor	34
Sample Letter to a Policymaker	35
Community Action Plan Template	36
Identifying Supporters and Opponents	37
Working with School Boards	38
Crafting Your Message	39

## Introduction

Two decades ago, SIECUS started the Community Advocacy Project in response to calls from individuals facing controversy over sex education in their communities. As decisions regarding sex education were increasingly debated at the state level, SIECUS expanded the project to document controversies about sex education across the country and monitor state legislation.

Today, through our expanded state policy work, SIECUS examines state-level sex education policies across the country, carefully tracks state legislation from introduction to passage, provides assistance to individuals and organizations who are advocating for sex education in their state or community, and develops resources and materials to assist advocates in their efforts.

Unfortunately, we have seen that sex education has the potential to become a highly controversial issue in any state or community. Often, a small but vocal group of individuals will organize with the sole purpose of opposing sex education. These opponents may argue for the elimination of all sex education programs or for the institution of an abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) program that censors information and relies on messages of fear and shame.

The good news is that we know from numerous national, state, and local surveys that the vast majority of people in the United States support sex education in schools. The key to overcoming opposition is to tap into this support by making people aware of the facts and providing them with the tools they need to take action.

The *Community Action Toolkit* provides the tools needed to become knowledgeable about sex education, build support in your state or community, work to implement sound policies, and institute or defend effective sex education programs that support and affirm young people's rights to honest information. The *Toolkit* is designed to serve as a resource for all advocates whether they are students, parents, teachers, school administrators, health professionals, youth-serving professionals, policymakers, or concerned community members.

SIECUS designed the *Toolkit* so that advocates can either use select components as standalone resources or for the *Toolkit* to be used in its entirety—depending on the individual need. While this means that some information, ideas, and suggestions may reappear throughout the *Toolkit*, we believe that this ultimately makes it more useful.

It is our sincere hope that you will find the *Community Action Toolkit* to be a valuable resource in your advocacy efforts. If you have questions or need additional information, SIECUS is always available to help. Call us at 202-265-2405 or email Jennifer Driver, SIECUS State Policy Director at [jdriver@siecus.org](mailto:jdriver@siecus.org) for further assistance.



## **Why Get Involved?**

SIECUS has been advocating for sound policies and programs related to sex education for over 50 years. We understand that this is not always an easy task. Discussions about sexuality, especially adolescent sexuality, often evoke strong personal opinions, feelings of discomfort, and highly charged emotions. For these reasons, an abundance of myths and misunderstandings surrounding sex education have developed over time. This can make advocating for sex education a daunting task.

There may come a point in your own efforts when you ask yourself, “Is it worth it? Do I really need to be involved?” In those moments, reminding yourself of the difficult realities our young people face may help you to confirm, “Yes, I *need* to be involved in this fight.”

## **Young people are not getting the information they need.**

Young people are bombarded with sexual images and messages from television, music, movies, and the internet. Yet when we look at the high rates of unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and dating and sexual violence among young people, it becomes clear that they are not getting the accurate, unbiased information about sexuality and sexual health that they need.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Government, many state-level governments, and numerous school systems across the country utilize abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs. AOUM programs have never been proven effective. These programs pose an overly-simplistic solution to a complex challenge and provide young people with a singular message: avoid all sexual activity.

Typically, AOUM programs do not provide young people with even the most basic information about unintended pregnancy and disease-prevention methods—other than abstinence. In fact, some go so far as to purposefully provide inaccurate or exaggerated information about STIs and contraceptive failure rates. With tactics like these, AOUM programs rely on fear and shame to control young people’s behavior. Additionally, these programs withhold information and have the potential to harm young people, especially LGBTQ students and survivors of sexual violence.

## **Young people benefit from comprehensive sexuality education.**

In contrast, sex education programs that are comprehensive provide young people with the information they need to make responsible decisions about their sexuality throughout their entire lives. Comprehensive sexuality education focuses on a holistic approach that offers complete, accurate, and age-appropriate information. These programs also help reduce risk of STIs and unintended pregnancy.

Scientific evaluations of sex education, HIV-prevention, and unintended pregnancy prevention programs that provide information on abstinence as well as condoms and contraceptive use have consistently found that these programs cause young people to:

1. delay intercourse,
2. reduce the frequency of intercourse,
3. reduce the number of sexual partners they have, and
4. increase condom and contraceptive use.

## **Young people need your help!**

Whether you are a young person yourself, a parent, an educator, a health care provider, a faith leader, a member of the community, and/or a combination of these, we need you. It is challenging to turn the support that we know exists into organized action.

The good news is that it can be done. And it *has* been done all across in the country — from Hawaii to Florida, Alaska to Mississippi — students, parents, educators, and policymakers have come together to successfully improve sex education in their communities.

## Sex Education is a Human Right

Sexuality is a fundamental part of who we are; to deny that is to deny a person's humanity. That's why we, as sexual and reproductive health, rights, and justice advocates, must promote sex education not just as a health need but as a human right. Ensuring that all people—and especially young people—have a complete and accurate understanding of how this core part of their identities can shape and affect them is a necessary and moral thing to do.

Good sexual health is measured by much more than the absence of disease. The full range of information provided by comprehensive sexuality education includes key components of health and well-being such as being able to communicate needs, wants, and desires; developing relationships with people; setting boundaries; and learning that you have a right to be treated with dignity and respect, no matter your identity.

## The Politics of Sex Education

Sex education has a long history of being politicized. Reading news articles or listening to political debates, one might think that adults cannot come to a consensus on whether schools should provide sex education or take a strict abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) approach.

In fact, when asked, the vast majority of adults, including parents and voters, in this country support sex education, disapprove of the government's investment in AOUM programs, and reject the popular myth that suggests teaching about sexuality encourages young people to be sexually active.

## Support for Sex Education

In early 2018, [GfK](#), an international market research organization, conducted a survey on behalf of Planned Parenthood Federation of America. The survey assessed how likely voters feel about sex education and federally-funded programs to prevent unintended teen pregnancy. The results confirmed what we already know to be true: people overwhelmingly support sex education. In addition, most people also support federal dollars being used to fund programs that reduce unintended pregnancy among young people.

What does “overwhelming support” look like?

- Eighty-nine percent of likely voters think it is important to have sex education in middle school
- Ninety-eight percent of likely voters think it is important to have sex education in high school

Beyond viewing sex education as important, respondents also agreed that sex education should cover a range of topics including birth control, STIs and HIV, puberty, consent, healthy relationships, sexual orientation, and abstinence.

Finally, the survey shows that most people support federal funding for programs to prevent unintended teen pregnancy including [The Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program \(TPPP\)](#) and the [Personal Responsibility Education Program \(PREP\)](#). There was very little support for federally funded programs that focus only on encouraging teens to delay sex until they are married.

## School-Based Sex Education

Parents overwhelmingly support making sex education part of middle and high school curricula. In addition, most parents believe that sex education can help young people make responsible decisions about sexual behavior and sexual health.

In 2014, Gfk, commissioned a study that surveyed 1,633 parents—both Democrats and Republicans—to assess their views on sex education in schools. The study found that:

- More than 93 percent of all parents place high importance on the provision of sex education in both middle and high school.
- More than 89 percent of all parents support including a wide range of topics in sex education including puberty, healthy relationships, abstinence, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and birth control in high school.
- A strong majority of Republican parents want puberty, healthy relationships, abstinence, STIs as topics included in sex education.

Sex education which includes a broad set of topics represents an area of strong agreement between parents of both political parties.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identifies [19 critical sex education topics](#) that should be included in school-based sex education; however, as of 2017, only 38% of high school students and 14% of middle school students receive all 19 topics.

## The Other Side

Opponents of sex education believe that abstinence from all sexual behavior is the only “education” that young people should be getting in schools. SIECUS supports teaching young people about abstinence; SIECUS’ [Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education; K-12](#) states that one of the four primary goals of sexuality education is to “help young people exercise responsibility regarding sexual relationships, including abstinence [and] how to resist pressures to become prematurely involved in sexual intercourse.” Abstinence, however, is just one of 39 sexual health topics included in the *Guidelines*.

## Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs Ignore Those Most in Need

Although they are often presented to communities and school boards as programs that are designed to prevent unintended pregnancy or HIV and other STIs, abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs consistently ignore many of the young people who are most in need of sexuality information, education, and skills. AOUM programs...

### ...Exclude Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) youth

LGBTQ students, particularly young men who have sex with men, LGBTQ youth of color, and young transgender women who have sex with men, are at increased risk for HIV and other STIs, yet AOUM programs fail to provide these students with any realistic strategies for protecting themselves from these risks—let alone ensure their overall sexual health and well-being.

AOUM program materials typically only discuss topics related to sexuality within the confines of a heterosexual marriage. Many of these programs also promote stereotypical gender roles that particularly isolate transgender and gender nonconforming young people.



### **...Erase Youth Who Have Experienced Sexual Trauma**

An alarming number of young people in this country are survivors of sexual abuse. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBS), 11.3% of female high school students and 3.5% of male high school students report having been forced to have sexual intercourse. And these numbers are likely even higher given the significant underreporting of sexual violence.

Unfortunately, AOUM programs fail to provide this vulnerable group of young people with information or skills that could help them cope with their experiences of abuse. Instead, students are simply told that all sexual activity outside of marriage is wrong and that individuals who engage in sexual activity before marriage are subject to dire consequences such as the inability to bond emotionally with a partner. Such messages are likely to worsen feelings of hurt, shame, anger, and embarrassment in these already isolated young people.

### **...Stigmatize Pregnant and Parenting Teens**

One main message of AOUM states that “bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child’s parents, and society.”

These messages fail to acknowledge that some students will already be pregnant or parenting a child by the time they receive this information. According to a 2014 summary report of U.S. teen pregnancy, birth, and abortion data, roughly 625,000 women under the age of 20 became pregnant in 2010. Of these teen pregnancies, 11,000 were among girls age 14 and younger. The vast majority of these pregnancies occurred outside of marriage.

According to the U.S. Office of Adolescent Health, nearly one in six 15-19 year olds who gave birth in 2013 already had one or more children. This indicates that already pregnant and parenting students are also in need of realistic sex education programs.

Telling these students that they have caused irrevocable harm to themselves, their children, and society is *not* the answer. These young people would be better served by programs that acknowledge the potential challenges of young parenthood, do not stigmatize young parents and, most importantly, provide support to these young people and their families.

## **Framing Sex Education**

When discussing sex education, many people refer to two distinct schools of thought: comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs. In reality, however, most schools in the U.S. teach programs that fall somewhere in between, and these programs are often called a variety of different names.

The following terms and definitions provide a basic understanding of the types of sex education programs that are currently offered in schools and communities. Remember, however, that names can be deceiving. It is important to look past labels and find out the specifics of what young people in your community really are, or are not, learning in their sex education programs.

### **Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)**

School-based sex education programs that start in kindergarten and continue through 12th grade. These programs include age-appropriate, medically accurate information on a broad set of topics related to sexuality including human development, relationships, personal skills, sexual behaviors including abstinence, sexual health, and society and culture. CSE programs provide students with opportunities for learning information, exploring their attitudes and values, and developing skills.

### **Abstinence-Plus, Abstinence-based, Abstinence-Focused or Abstinence-Centered**

All of these terms refer to programs that emphasize the benefits of abstinence. These programs also typically include information about sexual behavior other than intercourse as well as contraception and disease-prevention methods.

### **Abstinence-only**

Programs that emphasize abstinence from all sexual behaviors. These programs generally do not include information about contraception or disease-prevention methods.

### **Abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM)**

Programs that emphasize abstinence from all sexual behaviors outside of heterosexual marriage. If contraception or disease-prevention methods are discussed, these programs typically emphasize failure rates. In addition, they often present marriage as the only morally correct context for sexual activity.

### **Evidence-based**

Evidence-based programs are those that have been evaluated rigorously and are designed to reduce “risk behaviors” such as unintended pregnancy and HIV and other STIs.

### **Evidence-informed**

Evidence-informed programs have not yet undergone rigorous scientific evaluation but include content, instruction, and activities based on evidence from other research, programs, or best practices.

### **Harm or Risk Reduction**

Harm reduction programs are interventions designed to reduce “sexual risk behaviors” among young people by emphasizing the risks associated with sexual behavior. These programs’ primary goals are to reduce unintended pregnancy, HIV, and other STIs.

### **Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA)**

This is another name for AOUM programs. Despite the new name, these are the same programs that focus solely on abstinence and purposefully deprive students of the information and education they need to lead healthy lives. These programs disproportionately impact the most vulnerable populations including: young people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and survivors of sexual assault.

#### **Key Points**

- **Sex education is a human right**
- **Sex education that is comprehensive includes abstinence**
- **The majority of individuals in the U.S. do not support current policies that favor AOUM programs and funding.**
- **Names can be deceiving. It is important to look past labels and find out the specifics of what young people in your community really are, or are not, learning in their sex education programs.**

## Organizing to Support Sex Education Policy

Before organizing efforts to advance sex education policy, you may need to familiarize yourself with the existing policy landscape. This section will introduce you to how sex education policy decisions are made across the country and give you insight into who is making them. It will also look at debates that educators and advocates have faced over the years in an effort to help you prepare for, and hopefully prevent, controversy. Finally, this section will help you anticipate some of the arguments you may hear from opponents and offers talking points to effectively express the need to support comprehensive sexuality education.

### Sex Education Policy: Who Makes Decisions?

If you are going to work to support sex education policy in your community, it helps to understand the various agencies, elected officials, and school district staff that make these policy decisions.

Below is a general overview of organizations at the national, state, and local levels that impact sex education. Before beginning your advocacy efforts, you may have to do additional research to better determine which agencies and individuals make decisions in your community.

#### At the Federal Level

For the most part, the federal government does not have a direct role in local sex education. Instead it leaves such control to state and local bodies. However, because the federal government does control funding for many educational programs, it can influence programs in local schools and communities.

For example, the federal government currently provides funding for [the Personal Responsibility Education Program \(PREP\)](#) and [the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program \(TPPP\)](#), two programs that rely heavily on evidence-based interventions (EBIs). While these are not strictly sex education resources, they can support sex education. In addition, the federal government currently spends \$100 million funding abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs each year.

Although the federal government cannot require or control the content of sex education that is not supported by federal funds, many states and communities view the availability of federal money as a stamp of approval for EBIs and AOUM approaches. In addition, the recent support for EBIs and over three decades of investment in AOUM programs have drastically increased the number of EBI and AOUM curricula and materials that are available for schools and community-based programs. In this way, the federal government has been very influential in affecting how sex education is delivered at the local level. It is worth noting that there is currently no federal funding stream, nor has there ever been federal funding, dedicated to supporting sex education that is comprehensive.

#### At the State Level

States are much more directly involved in decisions about sex education than the federal government. States can mandate that sex education be taught, require schools to teach about HIV and other STIs, set statewide guidelines for topics, choose curricula, and approve textbooks. These decisions are made by a variety of agencies and elected officials whose titles and responsibilities differ by state. You can contact your state's education agencies or your elected officials to find out more.

Some states set rules about the content of sex education or STI/HIV prevention courses. Whether or not a course mandate is in place, states can dictate content for those programs that schools choose to teach. For example, a number of states require all courses to “stress abstinence.”

### **The State Legislature**

The State Legislature can enact a mandate for sex education or STI/HIV prevention courses. However, less than half of all states require that some form of sex education be taught in the schools. Instead, most states allow local school districts to decide whether to provide this type of education.

To find out if your state has course or content mandates, view the [SIECUS State Profiles](#) and [the State Laws And Policies Across The United States](#) chart.

### **Departments of Education and State Boards of Education**

All states have one or more governing bodies that oversee schools and education policy. These agencies and boards vary by state in terms of authority and title. They may have several responsibilities, such as designing curricula, approving materials, and setting outcome objectives for courses. These bodies can also set policies that specifically dictate the type of sex education schools are allowed to provide.

Helpful Resources:

[State School Policy Database](#)

[National School Board Association](#)

### **At the Local Level**

The majority of decisions about education policy are made at the local level. Whether or not a state course or content mandate is in place, local administrators may establish their own mandates. These local mandates may expand upon but cannot violate state mandates. If a state mandates that schools provide information on contraception and STI prevention, for example, a local community cannot choose to implement an AOUM program that does not contain this information as its sole curriculum. In contrast, if a state prohibits schools from providing information on contraception in favor of a strict AOUM message, schools cannot choose to include that information in their programs. It is important for local communities to review state requirements carefully. Some states provide leeway for local decisions, even within a mandate.

### **The School Board**

In almost all communities, the school board is involved in decisions about sex education. Among other things, the school board sets district policy and approves curricula, textbooks, pamphlets, and videos. Typically, school board members are elected, so it is important to pay close attention to local elections. While some school board members have strong backgrounds in education, others are often concerned community members with little experience in education and school administration.

### **The School Health Advisory Committee**

Many districts have created special advisory committees to review the materials used in school health and sex education courses. Most often these committees make recommendations to the school board which can either be accepted or rejected. The committee members are usually appointees or volunteers. Teachers, clergy, public health officials, parents, and students may serve on such advisory committees.



**The Superintendent, Principal, District Curriculum Coordinator, and Staff**

Although they do not set district policy, superintendents, principals, and other school administrators have some control over the content and methods used in their schools and classrooms. In the end, they are responsible for how sex education policies are enforced.

**Teachers**

Teachers remain the only people within this hierarchy who have daily direct contact with students, and, as such, they are highly influential in decisions about curriculum, materials, activities, and classroom discussions.

## Organizing in Your Community

One thing is certain—you can't go it alone. To effectively advocate for sex education that is comprehensive, you will need to build a broad network of community support. A diverse group of dedicated people working together can move mountains! The following suggestions can help you in this process.

### Do Your Homework

Research sex education. Delve into questions, such as:

- What does the research say?
- Who are the major voices in the debate?
- What resources are available?
- What organizations support sex education?
- What organizations oppose sex education and why?
- What are these opponents' strategies at the local, state, and/or national level?

Knowing this information will help you develop a strategy for moving forward and establishing yourself as a credible source for sex education information.

If you are reading this *Community Action Toolkit*, chances are you are already doing a great job on your homework. Congratulations!

You also must know what is going on in your state, school district, and local schools:

- Is there a state mandate for sex education?
- Does the state have education standards in place that include sexuality content (typically, but not always, within health education)?
- Is there a district mandate or policy in place?
- Does the school provide a course in sex education? If so, what is covered? If not, why not?
- Are there local organizations that provide sex education in the community or serve as guest speakers in schools?

Connect with the teachers in your local schools, especially those who are teaching health and/or sex education and science courses. Find out exactly what is taught in the classroom and encourage teachers who are supportive of sex education to start speaking out about it. They often know a great deal about what students need from a sex education course.

### Involve a Diverse Group of Community Members

Parents are a particularly effective constituency when working with local school boards since they have a vested interest in their children's education. There may also be other adults who do not have children in school but are concerned with the health and well-being of their community's young people, such as health care providers, business owners, clergy and other faith leaders, and social service providers. Try to involve a diverse group in your advocacy efforts.

Contact elected officials. Locate those who are supportive of sex education and involve them in your organizing efforts. Encourage them to discuss these issues with their constituents as well as other officials.

Seek out school nurses and community health care providers who are actively involved in providing health education and services. Those who are on the front lines of adolescent sexual health have the best understanding of what young people need.

Include students and local youth in your advocacy efforts. Young people can uniquely speak to the reality and needs of their peers and themselves. They can also organize support for sex education among their student government or general student body.

Once you have involved interested individuals, consider creating a formal group or coalition. Depending on your capacity, consider taking steps to increase your group's visibility through creating a name, a logo, a website, social media accounts, and/or in-person events.

### **Involve Local Organizations**

Find out which local organizations are working with youth or have a strong interest in this issue. Contact them to determine what services they can offer your group and/or if anyone on staff is willing to join your efforts. Some ideas for groups to solicit are:

- Parent Teacher Association/Organization
- Teacher's Union
- Youth serving organizations such as the YMCA, YWCA, and recreation centers
- Student groups
- Civic organizations such as the Junior League
- Family planning clinics
- HIV/AIDS organizations
- Health care providers
- Faith-based organizations

### **Involve Faith Organizations**

Reaching out to local faith organizations is very important. Although some groups that oppose sex education often claim to do so on behalf of religious parents and/or organizations, the truth is that many faith organizations are very supportive of sex education. Including representatives of various faith organizations in your advocacy group can strengthen your efforts. Religious communities are already organized and may offer access to a variety of resources, such as meeting space(s), volunteer networks, funding, and public relations opportunities.

Start with the interfaith alliance in your community (if one exists) or the statewide "conference of churches" rather than approaching congregations individually. This will allow you access to more people in less time. The [Religious Institute](#) may also be a helpful resource on issues of sex education and faith.

### **Involve National Organizations**

National organizations can aid with strategy, resource materials, and referrals. They may also put you in touch with other local allies and affiliates.

Examples of these organizations include:

- |  |                         |
|--|-------------------------|
| • SIECUS                                   | • Advocates for Youth   |
| • Planned Parenthood Federation of America | • Answer                |
|  | • Human Rights Campaign |

- Guttmacher Institute
- Healthy Teen Network
- Power to Decide
- In Our Own Voice: National Black Women's Reproductive Justice Agenda
- National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
- National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum
- National LGBTQ Taskforce
- School Based Health Alliance
- GLSEN

## **Working with School Boards**

Most decisions about sex education are made at the local level. As a result, you will likely spend most of your time as an advocate working with your local school board members.

### **Get to Know the School Board**

Contact each school board member personally. Determine each board member's educational priorities and their support for sex education.

- Be prepared to use different approaches when reaching out. Some board members may be most responsive to email, others will respond more readily to phone calls, and still others may be best reached through "snail mail" addressed to their attention at the school district office.
- Sometimes, it may be most effective simply to attend a routine school board meeting and make an in-person introduction to individual members before or after the meeting. You do not need to raise the topic of sex education immediately. You can use this one-to-one greeting as an opportunity to schedule a follow-up meeting at which you can discuss sex education.

As you learn each board member's stance on sex education, publicize what you find.

- When publicizing the views of a school board member, be prepared to do so through ALL available channels. Keep in mind that while you may be an avid user of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, some of the most influential citizens in your community may not use social media. Local community newspapers and community radio still have enormous potential to inform those most likely to vote in school board elections. Be sure to get your message out through traditional media as well as digital media.
- A respectful and informative tone works best when publicizing school board members' positions on sex education. Social media invites comments from community members (and outsiders) that may become accusatory and overly personal in tone. Monitor such activity if you use social media, and actively reinforce a respectful tone that shows your support for sex education is based on facts, not just feelings.

### **Discussing Sex Education with a School Board Member**

Provide each school board member with research and relevant literature. Help them become as informed as you are.

- Tailor the information to each board member's key concerns.
  - For example, if you learn that one school board member is most concerned about parent reaction, provide them with information showing most parents support sex education that is comprehensive.
- Schedule these one-on-one meetings well before the school board needs to make policy decisions. Your early outreach will let them know that you are a reliable source of information and make them more likely to turn to you when a situation arises.
  - Have members of your advocacy group take turns attending meetings. Make sure someone is present at all school board meetings. These meetings are often sparsely attended so the presence of even a few people can have a strong impact. Regular attendance prior to any controversy or decision about sex education can increase your credibility with the board members.
- Testify at school board meetings. Coordinate your testimony with other people so that your three or four key messages are reiterated.
- Encourage a wide range of community members to contact the school board. Even a few calls, letters, or emails can make a big difference in the outcome of a debate about sex education.

### **Be an Active Citizen during School Board Elections**

Remember that, while school board members may be appointed, most are elected. School board elections typically have low voter turnout, meaning that you can make a big difference in the quality of sex education in your community by urging the people you know to vote for candidates who are supportive.

- Organize a voter registration drive and urge people to vote for candidates who support a comprehensive approach to sex education.
- Encourage members of your advocacy group to run for seats on the school board. Or, consider running for the school board yourself!

### **Charter Schools are Different**

If you are trying to influence a public *charter* school, you may discover that sex education policies are determined by a separate governing board. Depending on your state, it may be a charter-specific board or even the State Board of Education. If your state is one of the over 40 U.S. states that authorize charter schools, be sure to confirm whether a local or state board is the appropriate policy-making body to approach.

### **Working with Policymakers**

The majority of decisions about sex education are made at the local level, so it's best to focus on working with school board members and school district staff. However, federal and state policymakers are integral in shaping requirements and limitations on sex education both through legislation and subsequent regulation and guidance.



Therefore, educating legislators is essential for advancing sex education. Fortunately, there are multiple ways to communicate with your state and federal policymakers. The most common and easiest way is to send them a constituent email.

In-person meetings with legislators and/or their staff can also create effective education and advocacy opportunities. Here are some tips to help you make the most of your time.

### **Be Prepared**

When conducting a visit to your legislator's office, they will likely have limited time to meet with you.

- Prepare a clear and concise message beforehand.
- Be able to back up your position with facts and personal anecdotes.
- Research their position on the issues and know your allies and opponents.
- If you are visiting their office with a group, decide each person's role ahead of time. It is helpful to identify a group leader who will kick off the visit and state the goals of the meeting.

### **Remain Flexible**

Arrive at the office at least 10 minutes before the meeting is scheduled to begin. Although meeting directly with the legislator is ideal, more often than not a staff person will stand in for them. Do not feel slighted if this occurs—this is common and meeting with staff is very important. These individuals have the ear of the legislator and serve as trusted resources for legislative decisions.

### **Bring a Constituent**

If you need to meet with a legislator who does not represent your district, find a constituent to bring along. If it is feasible, allow this person to lead the meeting. Policymakers are always more interested in what a voter in their district has to say. It is also helpful if this person can provide a story or anecdote explaining why the elected official should support a certain policy. Always try to demonstrate the connection between your request and the interests of the legislator's constituency.

### **Stay Focused**

Start by identifying yourself. A good way to begin the meeting is to express appreciation for past actions in favor of your issue. Stay focused and try to keep the conversation centered on your issue at all times. Never argue with the legislator, the legislative staff, or members of your advocacy group.

### **Be Direct**

Know your goal or "ask" before the meeting—what would you like the legislator to learn or do as a result of the meeting? You may want to bring a menu of ways they can support your cause, depending on where they stand on the issue. Try to secure tangible commitments such as sponsoring a relevant piece of legislation or moving a bill forward.

### **Be Honest**

If you do not know the answer to a question, indicate that you do not have the information but will provide it to them as soon as possible. Be sure to follow up with any information that was requested. Following up is as important as the meeting itself and serves as an excellent opportunity to establish trust and continue building a relationship with the office.

### **Be a Resource**

Thank the legislator or staff person for their time. Repeat your topline goal or your "ask" as appropriate. Leave them with a fact sheet or other materials that concisely summarizes your main points. Include

your contact information and establish yourself as a future resource. Offer your business card (if you have one) and request a business card of any staff member with whom you have met.

### **Send a Thank-You Note**

After your meeting, send a brief thank you note to the legislator and staff members you met. This is an opportunity to reiterate your key points and include any follow-up information and/or materials. It is perfectly acceptable to do this via email.

### **Key Points**

- **Familiarize yourself with the existing policy landscape**
- **To find out if your state has course or content mandates, view the [SIECUS State Profiles](#)**
- **Identify allies and engage diverse members**
- **Remember that the majority of sex education decisions are made at the local level**
- **Be prepared, honest, and flexible when meeting with policymakers**

## Messaging for Sex Education Policy

Whether you are speaking at a school board meeting, talking to a reporter on the phone, or drafting a letter-to-the-editor (LTE), it's important to have clear, concise messages. Crafting these messages and using them throughout your policy efforts can be a challenge. This section will help you develop materials that you can use when discussing the issue with other concerned community members as well as with school administrators, school board members, elected officials, and the media. It will also give you tips for getting the message out through press releases, LTEs, opinion editorials (op-eds), social media, and correspondence with policymakers.

### Speaking in Public

As you work to advance sex education, you will most likely have to speak in front of a group. The following suggestions will help you make an effective presentation.

#### Develop a Few Key Messages

Determine the most important messages you want to communicate. The biggest mistake many people make is thinking that they have to say everything. Keep your messages short and limit your remarks to approximately three or four key points—this will help ensure that you consistently communicate your strongest, most effective messages.

Remind your audience that this is about what benefits ALL young people. Opponents will likely counter that you are representing only a small, elite special-interest group. Be ready to emphasize from the start that:

- ALL young people deserve good health and support to remain in school and graduate.
- ALL young people deserve medically accurate sex education.
- Sex education must be inclusive of ALL young people--regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, disability status, family situation, or past or current sexual experiences.
- ALL parents deserve assurance that schools in their community are committed to providing factual, high quality information to keep their children safe and healthy—and that includes sex education.

Repeat, repeat, repeat. Take every opportunity to restate your key messages. If you are engaged in a public debate, use each question as an opportunity to communicate your key messages. Remember that you do not need to directly answer a question posed to you. If you do, try to end your answer with one of your key points. *Always restate one of your key messages when asked if you have anything else to add.*

#### Define Your Role

Determine what your position is at each meeting.

- Are you there as a public health expert to discuss studies and data?
- Are you there as an education expert to discuss student retention and academic achievement?

If so, rely on professional resources and research, and use personal references and emotional pleas sparingly. (*But don't avoid them altogether, especially in a community meeting.*)

- Or are you speaking as a parent, teacher, or school nurse?

If so, emphasize your concern for young people and use personal stories and community statistics to make your points. Use technical jargon sparingly.

## Get to Know Your Audience

Depending on your audience, your presentation content and style will vary. If you are addressing a group of parents, your messages should be different compared to addressing the press. Determine the most persuasive messages for each audience. For example, you might choose to emphasize the financial costs of instituting an ineffective abstinence-only-until-marriage program when talking to a school board or superintendent.

When talking to the media it is best to emphasize scientific facts. For example, you might explain that evidence suggests comprehensive sexuality education programs work while there is no evidence that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs work at all.

Remember to consider the messages you want to relay as well as those you want to avoid for each group you address.

## Affirm Shared Values

People are more inclined to receive your message positively if you can first calm their fears and affirm your shared values. While this is often easier said than done, there are some tactics you can use to find common ground: *Agree, bridge, and convince*.

- Start with stating something you can *agree* on. (“We all want...” or “You’re right that...”)
- Create a *bridge* to shift the conversation toward your messaging. (“However, ...” or “The thing to remember is ...”)
- Then, you’ll be better set up to *convince* them of your message.

For example:

If someone opposing sex education in schools says, “*Parents should be the ones talking to their children about sex. This has no business being taught in school.*”

You could respond with, “***You’re absolutely right*** that parents should talk to their children about their values and beliefs when it comes to sex. ***And I completely agree:*** parents can and should play a central role in how young people view sex and sexuality. ***The thing to remember is*** that too many young people aren’t getting any sex education at all—from their parents, from their teachers, or elsewhere. When we have sex education at school, we can ensure that the young people in our community are getting the trusted, age-appropriate, accurate information they need to stay safe and healthy. We owe that to our young people—and to their parents.”

## Practice Makes Perfect

Practice stating your key messages until they become second nature. If you are making a presentation, rehearse several times in front of family, friends, or a mirror, until you feel comfortable. Also, be sure to time yourself and keep within any designated time limit. If you go over your time, it is likely that you will be asked to stop and may miss the opportunity to make some important points. Don't get frustrated if your first few practice runs are less than perfect. Keep trying and you will improve.

Look at social media for examples of short messages with high impact. Facebook, Twitter, and other social media channels often display messages about sex education (from supporters as well as opponents) that are short-and-to-the-point. Try using some of these as talking points by practicing how you would say them aloud to another person or a group.

## Anticipate Questions

Inviting questions after a presentation gives you an opportunity to clarify your remarks and reiterate your key points. Answering unexpected questions, however, can be challenging and it is easy to be thrown off. It helps if you view each question as an opportunity to state your case, remember to keep your answers short, and stick to your messages. It is also helpful to prepare responses to likely arguments or questions so that you can avoid getting caught off-guard. If you are 'stumped' by a question you can't answer, state firmly that you will find the answer and make sure to report the answer back to the group.

## Make It Personal

While statistics and research are powerful tools, local examples or personal stories will ensure that your messages truly stick. For example, in one community, advocates for comprehensive sexuality education illustrated a statistic by stating that each year more young women in their community give birth than graduate from high school. This compelling fact was easy for people to understand and remember. Sharing stories and examples from family, friends, and community members will also illustrate your message on a more personal level (though you will likely want to keep the story anonymous or use pseudonyms to protect privacy).

## Be Confident

*Speak with conviction!* If your opponent claims that comprehensive sexuality education encourages young people to become sexually active, don't say "*I think* there are studies that show the opposite." Say, "Scientific studies *clearly show* that sex education does not hasten the onset of intercourse. In fact, it has been found to delay sexual activity among teens."

"I think" and "I feel" statements will come across weaker than definitive statements when you are speaking as an expert. If you are speaking as a parent or concerned adult who is sharing personal stories, "I think" and "I feel" statements are more appropriate.

Speak clearly, slowly, and loudly. The more practice you have communicating your points, the less likely you are to get tripped up with "ums" and "uhs."



Use body language that communicates confidence and conviction. Stand up straight and use emphatic gestures. Avoid reading directly from your paper—this often leads to a monotone presentation that does not connect with the audience. It is not necessary to memorize your remarks. Instead, be familiar enough with them that you can glance at your paper periodically and use it as a guide. When you are not looking at your paper, you should maintain eye contact with audience members to keep their attention focused on you. (If eye contact is uncomfortable for you, try looking at the tops of people's heads. This gives the impression that you are looking straight at the audience.)

### **Stay Focused on Your Key Messages**

When speaking, stick to your main points. Avoid going off on tangents or letting your opponents steer the conversation to unrelated or less important issues. You can maintain (or regain) control of a discussion or debate by returning to your key messages.

Focus on the issues rather than on the personalities or affiliations of the people involved in the discussion. Acknowledge that everyone involved wants what is best for the young people in the community.

### **Keep Cool, Calm, and Collected**

Make conscious decisions about how to present yourself. This includes what you wear, how you assert yourself, who you sit beside at the meeting, and how you act during other people's presentations. You want your audience to like your message, but it helps if they like you as well.

Always maintain a professional demeanor. Sex education can be a highly charged issue and many people have passionate feelings about it. A rational presentation with strong messages, backed up with facts, is the most effective.

### **Get a Little Help from Your Friends**

Ask family, friends, co-workers, and supporters to attend meetings or call in to radio or television shows where you are speaking. A friendly face or voice can make all the difference. Prompt them to ask questions that will allow you to get your main messages across.

If you are testifying at a meeting, coordinate with any colleagues who are also speaking so that you can support, rather than simply reiterate, or worse--contradict, each other in your testimony.

## **Working with Traditional and Social Media**

### **Traditional Media**

Involving the media is a great way to get your message out, reach concerned community members not yet involved, and influence key policymakers. The following suggestions will help you in dealing with reporters and others in the media.

### **Know Your Media Outlet**

Most traditional news media—newspaper, radio, and television—are geographically oriented. Some are strictly local and are only interested in a particular town or area. Other media outlets are statewide, national, or international in scope. Know who you are talking to and focus your discussion

accordingly. For example, an excellent way to get a national story (like one on federal abstinence-only-until-marriage funding) into a regional or local paper is to pitch a story on how the federal policy impacts your local community.

#### **Quick Tips:**

- **Read your local news regularly.**
- **Keep articles of interest to you and file them in a folder either in hard copy or electronic form.**
- **Take note of any reporters that tend to write about sex education.**

#### **Create a Media List and Update it Regularly**

Research and create a list of reporters in your area who cover local school board or health issues and how to contact them. Search online for listings of newspaper, radio, and television media outlets. Contact the assignment desk and ask which reporter covers schools or health issues. You can also contact organizations that you know support sex education. They may have media lists that they will share with you. Remember to update your list regularly as you learn information about what types of stories each reporter covers and how they prefer to be contacted.

#### **Quick Tips:**

- **Don't underestimate smaller outlets: podcasts, blogs, newsletters, community bulletins, flyers, etc. are also great ways of getting your message out.**
- **Because reporters often write for multiple outlets, Twitter and Facebook are great tools to follow and keep in touch with reporters who write about sex education issues.**
- **When a reporter writes a good story on your issue, let them know you appreciate the coverage by sharing the story on social media and sending a thank you email.**

#### **Give Them the Facts**

Facts speak for themselves. Always be prepared with three or four basic messages to support your argument. Back up the messages with facts. For example, if your state participates in the [Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)](#) conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), you might want to tell a reporter what percentage of high school seniors in your state have already had sexual intercourse. Or, check your health department's statistics on rates of STIs among young people.

#### **Quick Tips:**

- **Have current information and statistics at your fingertips.**
- **NEVER LIE TO REPORTERS –You will get caught.**

#### **Maintain the High Ground**

Reporters need stories and are particularly interested in those that involve controversy and debate. They will always try to pit one side against the other, especially regarding sensitive social issues. Do not feel intimidated. Stick to your main messages and back them up with the facts. Never criticize the media or the groups on the other side of your issue.

#### **Quick Tip:**

- **Ask who else has been interviewed for a story. Doing so will give you an idea of who else is involved in your issue and what angle the reporter is taking.**

### Provide Local Stories

Many reporters also seek out stories from a human interest perspective. It is important to have local stories to feed reporters.

#### Quick Tip:

- **If you're telling the story of a local individual or agency, be sure to get their permission in advance or offer to change names to protect their privacy.**

### Writing a Press Release

A press release is a tool used to alert the media. You can use a press release to state a position, launch a campaign, respond to a recent political decision, or comment on a new body of research. Send the press release out to everyone on your press list.

#### Quick Tips

- **"Pithy" quotes—ones that are substantive, but also cleverly or memorably phrased—often get the most attention. Spend time thinking about and crafting your quotations. The better they are, the more likely they will appear verbatim in the story.**
- **Always copy and paste your press release into the body of an email**
- **See *Tips for Writing a Press Release* and *Sample Press Release* for more information.**

### Write a Press Advisory

A press advisory is a specific kind of press release that announces an event (such as a community forum on sex education). These should place the emphasis on the time and location of the event.

#### Quick Tips:

- **Send advisories 2 or 3 days before the scheduled date.**
- **Do not put quotations or extensive details in a press advisory because it will deter reports from attending the event. Include just enough detail to "hook" them.**

### Keep in Touch

It helps to develop personal relationships with reporters and keeping in touch is an important part of this. Contact a reporter to remind them of a press event, send an email to reporters who didn't attend telling them how it went, or thank a reporter for writing a good or balanced story on your issue.

#### Quick Tips:

- **The best time to contact a reporter is between 10am and 3pm—before they begin to push up against the day's deadline, but after the first cup of coffee.**
- **In general, reporters greatly prefer email to phone calls. Call them only as a last resort.**
- **In the subject lines of your emails to reporters, do not put phrases like "Thought you would think this is interesting" or "Great Story!" Reporters will not read these emails. Instead, put a short fact-filled phrase in the subject line that will let the reporter know exactly what the email contains (e.g. Dallas School Board Approves Sex Ed Budget).**

### How to Write a Press Release

Reporters often get story ideas from the press releases they receive. Below are a few tips and a sample press release to help you get started:

## **Keep It Brief**

The press release should be no more than one page.

## **Write Like a Reporter**

A press release should read like a news story. Start by writing a brief, attention-grabbing headline that suggests your point of view. Below the headline, write the name of your city and state.

## **Be Active**

In the first sentence, make your organization or the coalition you are writing the press release on behalf of an active player. For example, “Parents For Public Health, a coalition of parents and health professionals, commends Representative Smith for supporting legislation that promotes comprehensive sexuality education.”

## **Provide Answers**

Don’t forget to answer the questions “who,” “what,” “when,” “where,” and “why” with the most important details at the beginning of the release.

## **Be Quotable**

Highlight your viewpoint and include positive, succinct quotes from a member of your organization or coalition. Your goal is to get reporters to insert these quotes, verbatim, into their stories. Identify the person (and organization) from whom the quote originates. You also want to include poignant facts that support your organization’s position as these may also be put into a news story verbatim.

## **Look Like a Professional**

To make your press release look as professional as possible, be sure to include a date, contact name, and phone number at the top of the release. End the release with “###”; this journalistic convention indicates that this is the end of the release.

## **Social Media**

Social media helps amplify advocacy efforts by reaching more people, in more places, faster than ever before. To use social media effectively, you should have a clear target audience in mind, know which social media platforms are most suited to that audience, and decide what results you want to gain from your efforts.

## **Platforms**

Whether you want contribute to the conversation, fundraise, or bring people together to make change, some of the most-used digital advocacy tools include Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, and blogs. Hundreds of social media applications exist, but to get started, spend your time and resources where your supporters are most likely to be. Then, integrate your efforts for better overall results.

## **Quick Tips:**

- Learn how to set up a [Facebook page for a cause](#).
- Learn how to set up a [Twitter account](#).
- Know the “dos and don’ts” and customs of the platform. (Twitter uses hashtags, Facebook uses posts and likes, etc.)
- [Check out the Pew Research Center for data on social media use](#).
- Refer to this [Social Media 101 guide](#)

## Be Social

Resist the urge to solely promote your cause. Instead, use social media to do just that — be social! Listen to and monitor other users, allies, and partners, just as you would do if you were walking into a room and speaking to people in person. Once you have a good sense of the ongoing conversation or interaction, begin to engage. Support and share the work of others, tag them in your posts and photos, provide feedback, join Twitter chats, like their photos, follow them, and more. Likewise, as you begin to interact with others, develop a tone of voice that is authentically your own. Avoid coming across as promotional, corporate, or bureaucratic.

### Quick Tips:

- **Share your point of view in a way that is open, positive, and enthusiastic.**
- **Be sure to credit others when repeating information.**

## Be Visual and Get Creative

Social media posts that include images, graphics and/or video, rather than plain text, tend to get a higher numbers of shares and likes. So get creative and consider what content may be most engaging for your audience.

## Hashtags

Hashtags (marked with the # symbol) spread information while helping to organize it. The hashtag is a favorite tool of conferences and event organizers, but it's also a way for Twitter and Facebook users to organize themselves: If everyone agrees to use a certain hashtag to tweet about a topic, it becomes easier to find, and more likely for others to discover the conversation. If you have the resources to do so, you can also track hashtags using various paid programs.

Commonly used hashtags related to sex education include:

- **Sex education:** #SexEd #RealSexEd #SexEducation
- **Supporting pregnant and parenting teens:** #NoTeenShame
- **Supporting funding for sex education:** #EvidenceOverIdeology, #NayToSRA
- **Birth control:** #ThxBC #BirthControlHelpedMe
- **Consent education:** #TeachThem

[Learn more about hashtags and best practices for using hashtags on Twitter](#)

## Analytics

Keep in mind that like all technology, social media is constantly changing and growing, and you will need to keep evaluating your social media plan to make sure that you are maximizing your reach and meaningfully engaging your audience.

Once you have decided upon which social media tools you will use, you may want to explore what built-in analytics they offer, and whether you will need additional analytics or monitoring capabilities. For example, some of these monitoring sites may be of use: [Google Analytics](#), [Google Alerts](#), [Technorati](#), [Addictomatic](#), [Twazzup](#), [Social Mention](#), [HootSuite](#), [Klout](#), [Web2express Monitoring](#), [BoardTracker](#), and [Tag Sleuth](#).

For more tips, check out Kansas University's Community Tool Box on [Using Social Media for Digital Advocacy](#).



## **Writing Opinion Editorials and Letters to the Editor**

An opinion editorial (op-ed) is a short, written piece sent to a newspaper that offers a clear and opinionated view of a current events issue. However, op-eds are not in direct response to something already published.

Letters to the editor (LTEs) are usually written responses to something that has appeared on the op-ed page or in a news story. Both LTEs and op-eds are an effective ways to reframe or add to the contents of existing media coverage and get your message out to members of your community, including key decision-makers.

Unlike newspaper articles, these letters are printed in your own words and can therefore have a great impact on your advocacy efforts. At the same time, it becomes even more important to craft your messages carefully. The following are a few tips to help you undertake this task.

### **Monitor the Paper**

Monitor your local newspaper's "Letters-to-the-Editor" column. Assess the outlet's balance in news coverage and write if you notice an imbalance, if you want to share a new perspective, or offer an alternate solution. Monitor articles and op-eds about sex education and consider offering your opinion as a follow up.

### **Have a Reason for Writing**

Construct your letters in response to a recent article, editorial, or community event. For example, "I am writing in response to your article about sex education, ('Anytown Changes Sex Ed Program', September 1, 2018)." For timeliness reasons (and to increase chances of publication), most outlets prefer email submissions in which the letter draft is pasted directly into an email and begins with a headline and "To the Editor:" or "Dear Editor:" Your letter should be submitted as quickly as possible after the publication of the original piece: within one or two days is best.

### **Explain Where You Fit In**

Start by noting your relationship to the issue, such as "I am the father of a fifth-grader" or "I am a health care professional."

### **State the Facts**

State facts to support your position. Include relevant data when applicable. For example, "I am concerned about rising teen pregnancy rates in Example County. According to the Department of Health, teen pregnancy rates increased at the staggering rate of XX percent between last year and this year." Be sure to hyperlink text to re-direct to your sources. This way, editors can click the links to easily verify that what you are saying is, in fact, fact.

### **Keep it Short**

Keep the letter short and to the point. Your letter should not exceed 200 words, but the shorter your submission, the more likely it will be printed in its entirety. If the outlet decides to shorten your letter, editors will usually cut from the final paragraphs — so don't save your point for the end.

### **Stay Focused**

Stick to the issues and do not attack individual reporters. Readers will respect reasoned arguments. Emphasize one or two points in concise, compelling language.

### **Use the Opportunity**

When applicable, take the opportunity to elicit support for your coalition or to encourage community members to attend school board meetings. Give people a way to contact you in case they would like to get involved.

### **Make the Connections**

In some cases, it may help to connect sex education to other pertinent issues for your community. For example, “A conservative parents’ group has started attacking the existing sex education program, at the same time the group has asked that a variety of books be put on restricted access at the local library. Clearly, this group has a broader agenda.”

### **Close Strong**

The last sentence of the letter is as important as the first. Restate your support for sex education in the closing sentence of the letter.

### **Include Important Information**

Read the submission guidelines for the outlet. Make sure to include your name, phone number, and the date you submitted the letter. Follow up with a phone call to find out if your letter will run.

### **Examples of Letter to the Editor**

- [Don’t hamper sex education](#)
- [Hill should back standards for sex education](#)
- [Letter to the editor: Senator's sex ed views are outdated](#)

### **Examples of Op-eds**

- [I’m a sexual consent educator. Here’s what’s missing in the Aziz Ansari conversation](#)
- [We Must Answer #MeToo with Comprehensive Sexuality Education](#)
- [Stop Missing the Point: Sex Ed Is a Human Right](#)

## Writing to Your Policymaker

Writing a letter, either via email, through an online action page, or mailing a hard copy, remains one of the most important tools for communicating with your elected officials on both the national and state level. Their job is to represent you and your interests, so your opinion is important to them. The following tips and sample letter below can help you undertake this task.

### Write or Type

While federal and state elected officials have varied policies when it comes to responding to correspondence from constituents, each letter gets read and tallied. To find the name or email address of your representatives, go to [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) or [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov), or call 202-224-3121. Don't forget to check-out SIECUS' website for opportunities to personalize letters on timely federal policy opportunities!

#### Federal Addresses

For Senators:  
The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

For Representatives:  
The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

### Respect Formalities

You should address your letter or email formally by saying:

- "Dear Senator \_\_\_\_\_," (For United States and State Senators)
- "Dear Mr./ Mrs./ Ms." (For any members of the House of Representatives, and Assembly members)

### Explain Yourself

Your letter should state that you are a constituent and explain why you are writing. If you are a parent concerned about a particular issue, lead with that. If there is a specific bill you would like your representative to support or oppose, mention it by its bill number (H.R. \_\_ or S. \_\_). For federal bills, the website [www.congress.gov](http://www.congress.gov) can help you find bill numbers. Your state legislature's website should provide similar information.

### Get Personal

Include a personal story, if applicable, to help you make your point. Your interests and personal experiences often help elected officials better understand your viewpoint.

### Stick to the Point

Address only one issue in each letter as different staff may be responsible for different issues.

### Be Polite

Although this goes without saying, it is important to be as polite as possible. You might want to start by thanking the official for his/her past record on your issue. If you have met your representative or seen her/him speak, mention that as well

### Key Points

- **It's important to have clear, concise messages**
- **State facts to support your position. Include relevant data when applicable.**

- **Be Quotable.** Highlight your viewpoint and include positive, succinct quotes from a member of your organization or coalition.
- **Remember that most sex education decisions are made at the local level**
- **Include a personal story, if applicable, to help you make your point.**
- **Stick to the point**

## Conclusion

Effectively advocating for the rights of young people requires a long-term commitment. Developing your plan, identifying supporters, crafting a clear message, and knowing what you're up against will keep you on the right track. Remember, you're not in this alone! Look to other states and communities to replicate successes and avoid mistakes already made. Add to your message with facts. You can strengthen your case using the [SIECUS State Profiles](#). Your work over time will help to ensure that young people in your community have the information and tools they need to ensure their lifelong sexual health and well-being.

## Resources

This section will provide helpful examples from the previous sections and planning worksheets to help get you organized.

### Sample Letter to the Editor

March 10, 2018

Dear Editor:

I'm writing to strongly disagree with your editorial on how sex education harms our community and its young people, "[Teaching Sex in Schools?](#)" (3/3/2015).

The reality is that young people are already learning about sex from peers, TV/movies, and the Internet. Treating information like forbidden fruit may make us as adults feel more comfortable, but we are doing a disservice to students who need and will use this education for the rest of their lives.

Numerous studies have found sex education programs that include information on both abstinence and contraception to be effective in helping teens delay sexual intercourse, reduce their number of partners, and increase contraception and condom use when they do become sexually active. This approach to sex education is supported by major medical organizations, including the American Public Health Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, and the Society for Adolescent Medicine.

Nonetheless, our school board members are turning a blind eye to research and compromising the health and well-being of our young people. Parents for Better Education in Anytown believes that our young people deserve better—they have a right to receive open and honest education that provides potentially life-saving information about their sexual health.

Sincerely,  
Ann Jones

Ann Jones  
President  
Parents for Better Education in Anytown  
(505) 555-5555  
[ann@anytownemail.com](mailto:ann@anytownemail.com)

## Sample Letter to a Policymaker

June 30, 2018

The Honorable Maria Tompkins  
Legislative Office Address  
Anytown, ST 12345

Dear Ms. Tompkins:

As a constituent, I urge you to ensure that comprehensive sexuality education is available in all schools in your district and across the state.

Numerous studies about sex education programs that include messages about both abstinence and contraception have found them effective in helping young people delay the onset of sexual intercourse, reduce their number of sexual partners, and increase contraception and condom use when they do become sexually active.

In contrast, there is no evidence that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs work. In fact, new research has concluded that some abstinence-only-until-marriage programs may actually be causing harm to young people by undermining the use of safer sex practices when participants do become sexually active.

The great majority of Americans share my support for sex education that is comprehensive in nature. A survey by the Othmer Institute found that 90% of the engaged, voting public believe all students should receive sexuality education that is age-appropriate, medically accurate, and that begins early and continues through high school. Further, this survey found that only 10% of engaged voters support abstinence-only-until-marriage programs being taught in public schools.

Please ensure that no new money is spent on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs and instead much-needed funds are put towards more effective sexuality education. I look forward to hearing from you on this important matter.

Sincerely,  
Ann Jones  
Ann Jones  
(505) 555-555  
[ann@anytownemail.com](mailto:ann@anytownemail.com)



## Community Action Plan Template

**Purpose:** To create a “script” for your improvement effort and support

**Directions:**

1. Using this form as a template, develop an action plan for each goal identified. Modify the form as needed to fit your unique context.
2. Distribute copies of each action plan to the members of the collaboration.
3. Keep copies handy to bring to meetings to review and update regularly. You may decide to develop new work plans for new phases of your reform effort.

**Goal:**

**Results/Accomplishments:**

<b>Action Steps</b> <i>What Will Be Done?</i>	<b>Responsibilities</b> <i>Who Will Do It?</i>	<b>Timeline</b> <i>By When? (Day/Month)</i>	<b>Resources</b> <i>A. Resources Available B. Resources Needed (financial, human, political &amp; other)</i>	<b>Potential Barriers</b> <i>A. What individuals or organizations might resist? B. How?</i>	<b>Communications Plan</b> <i>Who is involved? What methods? How often?</i>
<b>Step 1:</b>			<b>A.</b>  <b>B.</b>	<b>A.</b>  <b>B.</b>	
<b>Step 2:</b>			<b>A.</b>  <b>B.</b>	<b>A.</b>  <b>B.</b>	
<b>Step 3:</b>			<b>A.</b>  <b>B.</b>	<b>A.</b>  <b>B.</b>	

**Evidence of Success** (*How will you know that you are making progress? What are your benchmarks?*)

**Evaluation Process** (*How will you determine that your goal has been reached? What are your measures?*)

## Identifying Supporters and Opponents

**Purpose:** Use this tool to identify supporters and opponents of the work

**Directions:**

1. Identify the major supporters and opponent of sex education at in your state or community.
2. Distribute copies to members of the collaboration.
3. Keep copies handy to bring to meetings to review and update regularly.

Who are My State and Local Champions?			
Who are the major individual voices in sex education?	What organizations support sex education?	What organizations oppose sex education and why?	What are these opponents' strategies at the local, state, and/or national level?

## Working with School Boards

**Purpose:** To create a “script” for your improvement effort and support

**Goal:**

**Results/Accomplishments:**

Preparing for Meeting	Timeline <i>By When?</i> <i>(Day/Month)</i>	Who needs to attend	Key Points to Address	Potential Challenges	Next Steps and Follow Up
Step 1:			A.  B.	A.  B.	
Step 2:			A.  B.	A.  B.	
Step 3:			A.  B.	A.  B.	

## Crafting Your Message

**Purpose:** Use this tool to help craft your message to advance sex education

**Directions:**

1. Set a communication goal for your work
2. Identify the target audience for the message
3. Identify how you will share your message—e.g. through an op-ed, LTE, or speaking at a meeting
4. Identify 3-4 key points you want the audience to take away from the message
5. Note any data or information to strengthen your message

Crafting Your Message	
Communication Goal	
Target Audience	
Dissemination of Message	
Key Messages	
Supporting Data	