

The SIECUS State Profiles



ARKANSAS

ARKANSAS'S SEX ED SNAPSHOT

THE STATE OF SEX EDUCATION

Advocates have worked diligently to advance sex education in Arkansas, most recently cumulating in the introduction of [Senate Bill 304](#). Known as the Arkansas Healthy Lifestyle Education Act, the bill sought to require curriculum to include age-appropriate instruction on both abstinence and contraceptives to prevent unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, as well as establish an “opt-out” policy for parents to remove their children from sex education instruction. Organizations including Family Council actively worked against Senate Bill 304, and Representative Mark Lowrey attempted to amend the bill to prohibit educators from Planned Parenthood from teaching curriculum in schools. While Senate Bill 304 ultimately failed, sex education advocates were previously successful in passing a 2015 [measure](#) that requires schools to provide instruction on dating violence.

While recent efforts to advance sex education have been unsuccessful, legislators passed a slew of 2019 anti-abortion bills ([House Bill 1439](#), [Senate Bill 2](#), [Senate Bill 149](#)) to restrict access to abortion care and, ultimately, ban it altogether. Affirming abortion as a valid outcome of pregnancy is a critical topic for inclusion within comprehensive sex education programs. Limiting access to abortion further inhibits the ability of young people to make informed decisions about their health and future. Arkansas statute does not require curriculum to include instruction on pregnancy outcomes if sex education is taught in schools.

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

Nearly 85 percent of public school districts [reported](#) teaching some form of abstinence, and 24 districts reported not teaching sex education at all in 2017. In Phillips County alone, only about half of the county’s educators [reported](#) teaching sex education. Students [report](#) receiving instruction that is primarily focused on abstinence and includes the use of scare tactics, intended to frighten and shame students into avoiding sexual activity.

GLSEN’s [2017 National School Climate Survey](#) found that almost 90 percent of LGBTQ students in Arkansas [reported](#) regularly hearing homophobic remarks, and nearly 80 percent of students reported being verbally harassed based on their sexual orientation. 56 percent of students reported being harassed based on their gender expression. These devastating rates demonstrate the critical need for advanced sex education curriculum that includes culturally responsive instruction related to sexual orientation and gender identity, along with bullying and harassment.

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To address these barriers, Planned Parenthood Great Plains offers sex education in schools and community organizations and actively works to block restrictive legislation. Right now, advocates can take action to ensure young people in their community have access to quality sex education. After contacting their local school board, advocates can determine what topics are missing from sex education instruction, such as instruction on consent, sexual orientation and gender identity, and contraceptives. They can then vocalize the important need for advancing sex education requirements in their community. Further, advocates can contact their representatives to discuss the critical need for advancing requirements and increasing funding for schools to implement quality sex education. Advocates are encouraged to use the SIECUS [Community Action Toolkit](#) to guide local efforts.

STATE SEX EDUCATION POLICIES AND REQUIREMENTS AT A GLANCE

- Arkansas schools are **not** required to teach sex education or instruction on HIV or STIs.
 - If sex education is offered, curriculum must stress abstinence.
- If sex education is offered, curriculum is not required to include instruction on consent.
- If sex education is offered, curriculum is not required to include instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Arkansas has no standard regarding the ability of parents and guardians to remove their children from sex education instruction.
- Arkansas has no standard regarding medically accurate sex education instruction. However, instruction on dating violence must be based on scientific research.

STATE HOUSE HIGHLIGHTS

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

2019 Legislative Session

[Senate Bill 304](#) (failed):

- Sought to establish the Arkansas Healthy Lifestyle Education Act. If successful, the bill would have required that instruction on pregnancy and STI prevention be age-appropriate and use primary prevention/risk avoidance approaches. The bill would have also established the right of parents or guardians to remove their children from instruction on teen pregnancy and STIs. [This is referred to as an “opt-out” policy](#)

MORE ON SEX ED IN ARKANSAS

STATE LAW

Arkansas law does not require schools to teach sex education or HIV or other STIs instruction. If a school offers a sex education or AIDS prevention program, [Arkansas Code § 6-18-703](#) states that abstinence must be stressed, as “it is the policy of the State of Arkansas to discourage ... sexual activity by students.” Furthermore, every public school sex education and AIDS prevention education program must “emphasize premarital abstinence as the only sure means of avoiding pregnancy and the sexual contraction of [AIDS] and other [STDs].”

In order to be [accredited by the Arkansas Board of Education](#), education standards require public schools to offer health and safety education, and students are required to complete 0.5 units of health and safety in order to graduate high school. In 2015, [Arkansas Code § 6-16-1004](#) was amended to include dating violence awareness as a mandatory component of health and safety education for students in grades 7-12. Materials must be age-appropriate and based on scientific research.

Local school boards are empowered to establish school-based health clinics, which may provide sex education. Such education must include instruction on abstinence. School-based health clinics may also prescribe and distribute contraceptives with written parental consent. However, no state funds may be used to purchase condoms or contraceptives. Whether or not a school-based health clinic teaches sex education or distributes contraceptives is left to the discretion of the school board. Clinics cannot provide abortion referrals.

Arkansas statutes do not require parental permission for students to participate in sex education or HIV/AIDS instruction, nor do they indicate whether parents or guardians may remove their children from such classes.

STATE STANDARDS

Arkansas maintains [curriculum standards](#) for physical and health education, addressing STIs and HIV beginning in grade five. The curriculum standards stress the importance of abstinence, as well as the possible physical, emotional, and social consequences of sexual activity. Specific course content is left to the discretion of the local school districts.

STATE LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITY

State legislative activity related to sex education does not take place in isolation from the broader embroiled political and policy climate. Attacks on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ) individuals, and efforts to limit access to abortion care and other reproductive health care services prevent students from receiving comprehensive sex education and accessing sexual and reproductive health care services. Below are highlights of current legislative activity related to these topics. Arkansas’s 2020 session convened February 10, 2020.

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2019 SESSION: ADJOURNED APRIL 24, 2019

TITLE	DESCRIPTION	STATUS
HOUSE BILL 1439	PROHIBITS ABORTIONS AFTER 18 WEEKS EXCEPT IN THE CASE OF A MEDICAL EMERGENCY.	ENACTED
SENATE BILL 2	PROHIBITS ABORTION IF THE FETUS HAS OR MAY HAVE DOWN SYNDROME EXCEPT IN THE CASE OF A MEDICAL EMERGENCY.	ENACTED
SENATE BILL 149	PROHIBITS ABORTION EXCEPT IN THE CASE OF A MEDICAL EMERGENCY.	ENACTED
SENATE BILL 304	REQUIRES THAT INSTRUCTION ON PREGNANCY AND STI PREVENTION BE AGE-APPROPRIATE AND INCLUDE INSTRUCTION ON BOTH ABSTINENCE AND CONTRACEPTIVES TO PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY. ESTABLISHES THE RIGHT OF PARENTS OR LEGAL GUARDIANS TO SUBMIT A WRITTEN REQUEST TO REMOVE THEIR CHILDREN FROM ALL OR ANY PART OF HEALTH CURRICULUM RELATED TO TEENAGE PREGNANCY OR STIs.	DIED IN THE HOUSE COMMITTEE

LEGISLATIVE KEY

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

YOUTH SEXUAL HEALTH DATA

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

ARKANSAS SCHOOL HEALTH PROFILES DATA

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

Arkansas did not participate in the 2018 School Health Profiles.

Below are key instruction highlights for secondary schools in Arkansas as [reported](#) for the 2015–2016 school year. In this edition of the School Health Profiles, the CDC identified 19 sexual health education topics and has since updated the number of topics to 20.

Reported teaching all 19 critical sexual health education topics

- 18% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students all 19 critical sexual health education topics in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 38% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students all 19 critical sexual health education topics in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

Reported teaching about the benefits of being sexually abstinent

- 70% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students about the benefits of being sexually abstinent in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 93.9% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students about the benefits of being sexually abstinent in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

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

- 58.1% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students how to access valid and reliable information, products, and services related to HIV, other STDs, and pregnancy in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 87.8% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students how to access valid and reliable information, products, and services related to HIV, other STDs, and pregnancy in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

Reported teaching how to create and sustain healthy and respectful relationships

- 67.8% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students how to create and sustain healthy and respectful relationships in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 90.2% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students how to create and sustain healthy and respectful relationships in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

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

- 50% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students about preventive care that is necessary to maintain reproductive and sexual health in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 82.9% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students about preventive care that is necessary to maintain reproductive and sexual health in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

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Reported teaching how to correctly use a condom

- 21.3% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students how to correctly use a condom in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 49.9% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students how to correctly use a condom in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

Reported teaching about methods of contraception other than condoms

- 36.6% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students about methods of contraception other than condoms in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 74.8% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students about methods of contraception other than condoms in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

Reported teaching about sexual orientation

- 30.8% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students about sexual orientation in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 59.9% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students about sexual orientation in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

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

- 34.4% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students about gender roles, gender identity, or gender expression in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 60.8% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students about gender roles, gender identity, or gender expression in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

Reported providing curricula or supplementary materials relevant to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) youth

- 44.1% of Arkansas secondary schools provided students with curricula or supplementary materials that included HIV, STD, or pregnancy prevention information relevant to LGBTQ youth.

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

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

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