

# **The Future of Sex Education Research Agenda**

**A CALL TO ACTION**

**The Future of Sex Education Research Call to Action is a product developed from the Future of Sex Education Research convening held on February 20–21, 2021 by the Future of Sex Education (FoSE) Initiative, a partnership between Advocates for Youth, Answer, and SIECUS: SexEd for Social Change and co-host the Widener University Center on Human Sexuality Studies.**

This event was held in order to advance a conversation on improving and expanding data collection, evaluation, and research efforts to understand the broader individual, community, and social benefits of comprehensive sex education (CSE) in the United States.



**ADVOCATES FOR YOUTH** partners with youth leaders, adult allies, and youth-serving organizations to advocate for policies and champion programs that recognize young people's rights to honest sexual health information; accessible, confidential, and affordable sexual health services; and the resources and opportunities necessary to create sexual health equity for all youth. Advocates for Youth envisions a society that views sexuality as normal and healthy and treats young people with respect. Advocates' vision is informed by its core values of Rights. Respect. Responsibility.



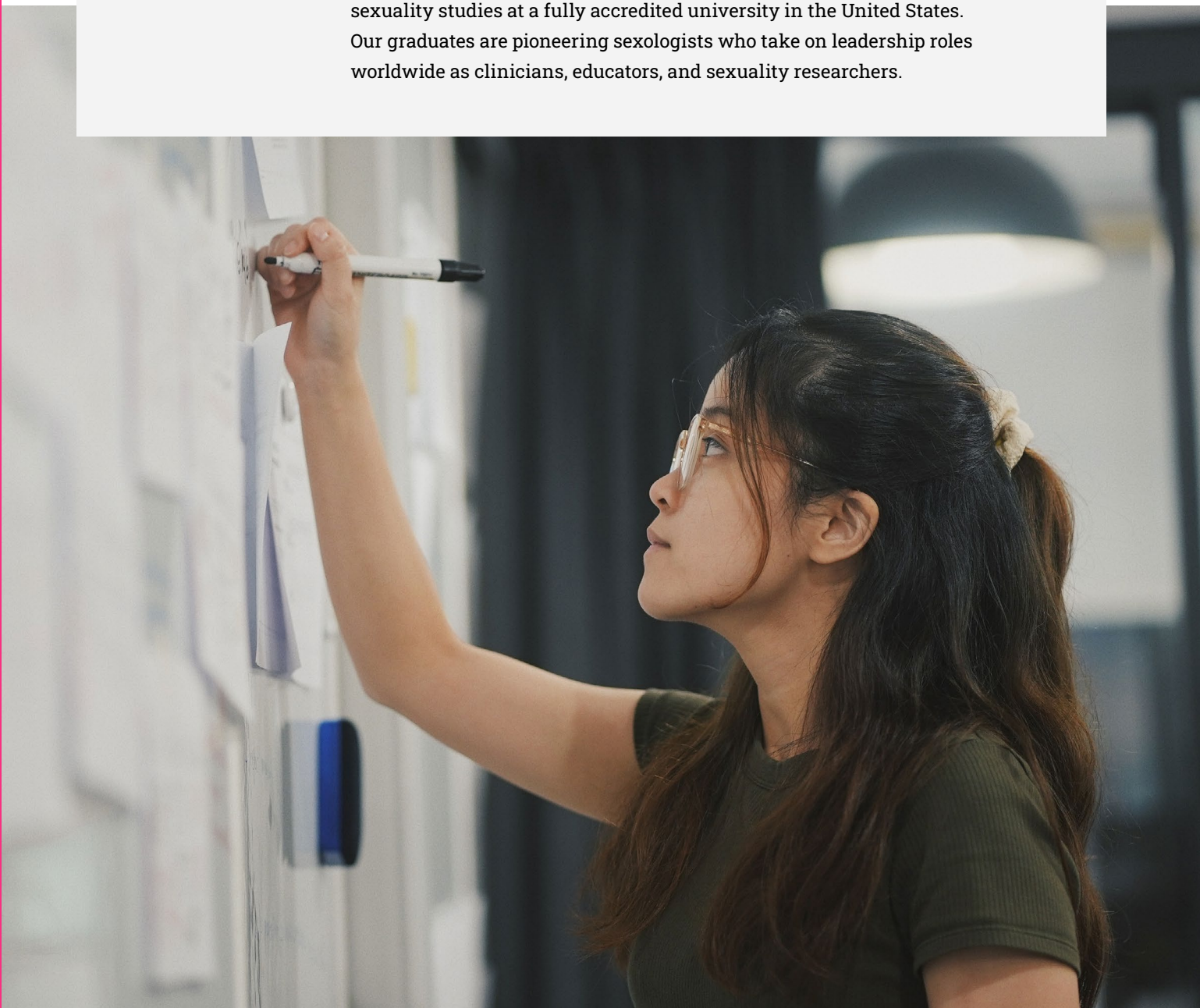
**ANSWER** provides and promotes unfettered access to comprehensive sexuality education for young people and the adults who teach them. Answer envisions a nation in which sexuality is recognized as a normal, healthy part of development and every young person's right to high-quality sex education is fulfilled. For nearly 40 years, they have helped adults be the best sexuality educators they can be by providing the latest resources, most current information and best practices for reaching and teaching the young people in their lives. Answer is also dedicated to ensuring young people have access to the information they need to be happy, healthy, and safe well into the future.



**SIECUS: SEX ED FOR SOCIAL CHANGE** has served as one of the national voices for sex education since 1964, asserting that sexuality is a fundamental part of being human, one worthy of dignity and respect. Through advocacy, policy and coalition building, SIECUS advances sex education as a vehicle for social change—where all people receive sex education, are affirmed in their identities, and have power to make decisions about their own health, pleasure and wholeness.



**THE CENTER FOR HUMAN SEXUALITY STUDIES AT WIDENER UNIVERSITY (CHSS)** houses one of the only doctoral programs in human sexuality studies at a fully accredited university in the United States. Our graduates are pioneering sexologists who take on leadership roles worldwide as clinicians, educators, and sexuality researchers.



**The research is indisputable: Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) programs are incredibly effective at encouraging a range of positive sexual behaviors in adolescents, such as delaying the onset of sexual activity, reducing the number of sexual health partners, encouraging the effective use of contraception, and preventing the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs).<sup>1</sup>**

Yet, surveys of adolescents reveal that the U.S. is failing to provide young people with the foundation of sexual health information and the skills they need to lead healthy lives. There are glaring gaps in the evidence of how to support effective adolescent sexual health instruction and development.

When CSE includes instruction on topics such as healthy relationships and consent, it has both psychological and physical benefits. Among many positive outcomes, CSE can work toward reducing interpersonal violence and suicide rates among young people, creating a safer world for everyone. In fact, a Harvard study found that 87% of respondents aged 18 to 25 reported experiencing some form of sexual violence in their lifetime<sup>2</sup>, demonstrating the urgent need for all young people to receive instruction on sexual violence prevention. In addition, LGBTQ+ youth are 23% less likely to attempt suicide when schools include education on LGBTQ+ subjects or people.<sup>3</sup> Yet, just 42.8% of all high schools and 17.6% of middle schools in the U.S. provide all 20 topics identified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as critical sex education topics.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE NEED FOR SEX ED, BY THE NUMBERS:

- 87%** of respondents aged 18 to 25 reported **experiencing some form of sexual violence** in their lifetime, according to one Harvard study.
- 23%** **decrease in likelihood of suicide attempts** in LGBTQ+ youth is reported when schools include education on LGBTQ+ subjects or people.
- 42.8%** **of high schools** in the U.S. provide all 20 topics identified by the CDC as critical sex education topics.
- 17.6%** **of middle schools** in the U.S. provide all 20 topics identified by the CDC as critical sex education topics.



The informational gap in evidence-based sex education programs that work and the outcomes that young people experience is vast. This gap in sexual health research and academic practices in the U.S. is expected. Prior research has focused almost exclusively on narrow measures of the effectiveness of sex education, centered around unwanted pregnancy and STI prevention.<sup>4</sup> It is time to improve sexual health research and data collection to better understand how to provide programs that support young people in a broad range of beneficial sexual health and risk behavior outcomes, in order to substantiate how important it is for young people to receive a more comprehensive view of sexuality and relationships that makes sense in their communities and to ensure that the sexual health programs they receive help them do so.

To do so, the three Future of Sex Ed (FoSE) partners—Advocates for Youth, Answer and SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change—joined the Widener University Center for Human Sexuality Studies to co-host a [research convening in February 2021](#) that brought together educators and researchers to brainstorm next steps to ensure young people receive the highest-quality sex education. This document highlights the findings from the convening and offers recommendations for improving the research methodology and data collection in the field of human sexuality. ■

<sup>1</sup> Advocates for Youth. *Comprehensive Sex Education: Research and Results*. September 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Weissbourd et al., Harvard Graduate School of Education. *The Talk: How Adults Can Promote Young People's Healthy Relationships and Prevent Misogyny and Sexual Harassment*. May 2017.

<sup>3</sup> The Trevor Project. *Research Brief: LGBTQ Youth Suicide Prevention in Schools*. August 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Goldfarb, E.S., & Lieberman, L.D. *Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education*. January 2021.







It's real clear that if you have a supportive school environment, school policies that support (...) LGBTQ kids, or other groups, **they do better**. They have less mental health problems; they have less depression; they have less suicidal ideation.

**John Santelli**

Adolescent sexual & reproductive health  
researcher at Columbia University

# The Future of Sex Education

## Research Convening

The [February 2021 Future of Sex Education Research Convening](#) brought together almost 200 academics, researchers, sexuality experts, and community leaders to discuss the need to improve the current state of sex education research. The convening highlighted the importance of improving measures and methods of data collection to better document the breadth of individual and social impact from comprehensive sex education programs. In particular, the event focused on the barriers to improving research and curriculum, as well as recommendations for public officials, funding agencies, and researchers and academics.

The convening began with a conversation about [recent research into the benefits of CSE](#). This created a foundation for the speakers to talk about why CSE is lacking in their communities, as well as ways to support research in pursuit of better sex education, including discussion on the impact of systemic racism in the field of sex education, both on a research level and on an educational level. Further points were made about overcoming various obstacles in hopes of establishing more research into the effectiveness of comprehensive sex education and the harm of sexual risk avoidance programming. Finally, participants participated in small groups to identify any additional barriers and to brainstorm solutions for how research

on sex education programs can be expanded and improved to better evidence the broader skills and attitudinal changes experienced by participation in comprehensive sex education programs.

### FoSE Research Convening Findings

The convening focused on measured outcomes of CSE. Findings from [Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education](#) found that CSE results in:

- Appreciation of sexual diversity
- Dating and interpersonal violence prevention
- Child sex abuse prevention
- Promotion of healthy relationships
- Social emotional learning
- Media literacy.



These outcomes can only be achieved if academic institutions and communities make a commitment to high-quality research efforts. Limitations to research are often found due to research methodologies that focus narrowly on pregnancy and STI rates, lack of funding that considers behavior and attitudinal changes, and the lack of accessible data to better consider other benefits and impacts of sex education programs. Insufficient data explaining broad, positive outcomes of sex education programs could be attributed to the inadequate measuring scales or tools to assess sexual attitude changes over time.

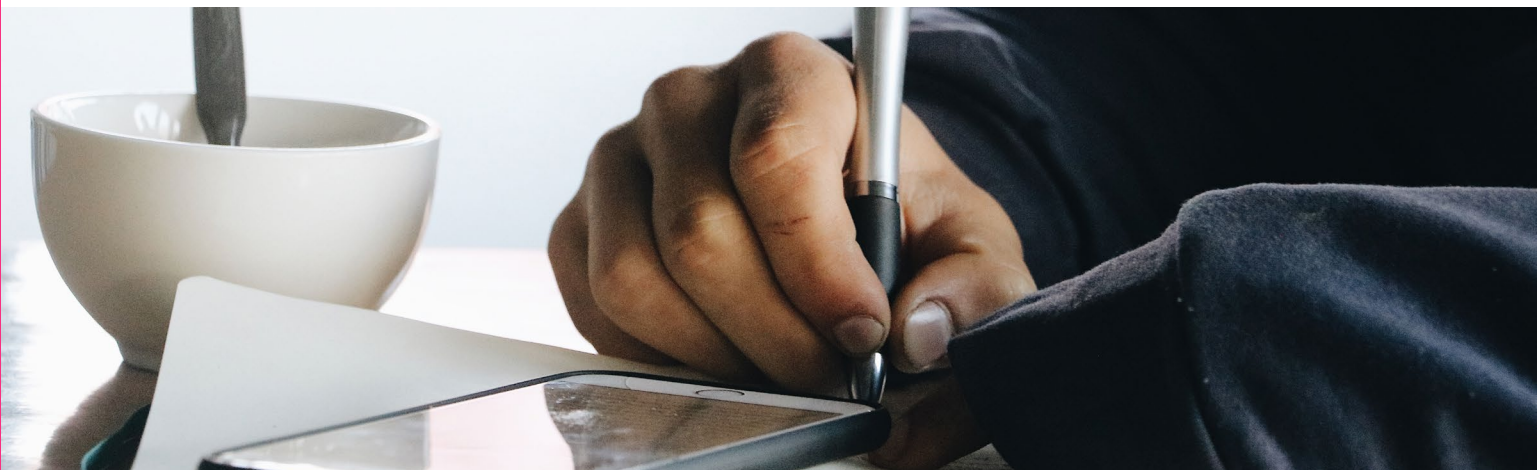
The [research convening](#) identified factors limiting the scope of CSE research. These issues included:

- Research outside of academia is largely unrecognized.
- Lack of racial diversity among sex educators.
- Research within academia is mainly conducted by white researchers with white participants.
- Lack of trust between institutions and communities—as a result of insufficient diversity among researchers—can cause inaccurate responses from participants.
- Voices of students with disabilities, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) students, and LGBTQ+ young people are largely underrepresented in research.

**These outcomes can only be achieved if academic institutions and communities make a commitment to high-quality research efforts.**

- Researchers experience difficulty obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.
- Minimal follow-up on qualitative research; challenging to follow young people over time.
- Parental hesitation in approving young peoples' participation in research.

Many speakers emphasized the gatekeeping that occurs in academia within the research process. Researchers explained how funding is often exclusively provided to projects associated with institutions, while research fails to address what communities actually need. The convening participants also identified using social media to overcome this gatekeeping. Further discussion included using the poll feature on Instagram stories to ask young people about their lived experiences.







What we know is that when you lift up Black scholars, when you **lift up scholars of color**, everybody's going [to] get lifted up.

**Javontae Lee Williams**

Adjunct Professor at Widener University



## FoSE Research Convening Recommendations

Better sex education starts with better research. Participants at the convening identified suggestions for improving future research, including:



### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

The U.S. needs better national data on adolescent health, including data on sexual health and risk behaviors beyond pregnancy and disease prevention measures. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has an opportunity to improve sex education for all young people by improving and expanding national data collection on adolescent sexual health and risk indicators that include behaviors, attitude, and personal skill shift.

- **The National Institute of Health and the National Center for Health Statistics** and/or potentially other science-based offices within HHS should:
  - Create a national repository of adolescent sexual health data and expand data measures to include: exposure, risk factors, and protection factors related to adolescent sexual violence and child sexual abuse; health outcomes for sexual minority youth; attitudinal and behavior changes related to sexual and gender diversity; behavior and comprehension of healthy relationship goals like consent, refusal skills, negotiation, and communication; and access to and need for sexual health services.
  - Adopt new research methodology standards and guidance for adolescent sexual health research that moves beyond the classic health-focused IRB/randomized controlled trials (RCT) model to include more high-quality, randomized-controlled evaluations, including formal, participatory, quantitative, and qualitative methodologies. UNESCO is developing new technical guidance on evaluating sex education programs, and HHS should adapt it for the U.S.
  - Increase funding so that states can collect state-wide comprehensive data on adolescent sexual health indicators.
- **The CDC's Division of Adolescent Sexual Health (DASH)**, within HHS, should expand and improve Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) data. This should include:
  - Designing additions to the YRBSS to prioritize surveillance of receipt, content quality, and the ability to test the impact and consequences of CSE programs.
  - Add questions related to the need for and access to sexual health services and on the perceived adequacy of sex ed received by topic.
  - Explore opportunities to link data from the School Health Profile (SHP) surveys to the YRBSS to better integrate data collected from school administrators and to collect direct data on student experiences.



- **Research agencies at HHS** should fund adolescent sexual health research that improves national data collected through the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) to expand questions on the content of sex ed received. Suggestions include:
  - Collecting data on grade levels of program implementation, rating of the adequacy of the education received, and gaps in instruction that youth want more or less information on (e.g., condoms, abstinence, consent, STIs, contraception, etc.).
  - Measure the quality and content of sex education programs through what is referred to as “tone”—that is, whether instruction is perceived as negative or positive. This is necessary to better measure topic exposure and efficacy.
  - Support funding to states to encourage statewide collection of comprehensive data on adolescent sexual health indicators.







## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDING AGENCIES AND PRIVATE PHILANTHROPISTS

One of the largest barriers to improving research on adolescent sexual health is the lack of funding to do so. Funding agencies and private philanthropists **play a critical role** to support research that is community based and focuses on a more complete understanding of effective sex education practices.

Foundations and private philanthropy should:

- Fund projects that **support expanding research methodology practices**.
  - Fund projects that focus on social emotional learning and mental health, such as violence prevention funding.
  - Focus on funding long-term research instead of on focused interventions.
- Provide funding for research that **focuses on adolescent sexual health needs and outcomes for students with disabilities, BIPOC students, and LGBTQ+ young people**.
  - Shift investments to fund research outside of academic institutions, particularly if the principal investigator (PI) comes from a BIPOC community.
- Form and contribute to repository of private funding agencies that **previously funded sex education research** with a list of previously funded projects.

**One of the largest barriers to improving research on adolescent sexual health is the lack of funding to do so.**







I think it's important that we pay more attention to the experiences of students and **listen to the feedback that students have to offer.**

**Laina Bay-Cheng**

Associate Dean for Faculty Development  
at University at Buffalo School of Social Work





## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS AND ACADEMICS

Removing barriers to improving the quality, breadth, and analysis of sex education data and evidence collection will not happen overnight. Yet, there are numerous actions that human sexuality academics and researchers can take now to move the research needle forward. The following recommendations focus on what can happen now to expand data collection on sex education and adolescent sexual health outcomes.

- **Conduct research with an intersectional framework** to address and combat systemic racism:
  - Practice reflexivity throughout the research process to understand motivations for research, especially as a PI who does not match the population of interest.
    - Maintain cultural humility.
    - Commit to sharing findings with research participants and BIPOC youth-serving organizations.
  - Senior scholars need to lift up the voices of people with diverse lived experiences.
    - White researchers must share resources with BIPOC researchers.
    - Increase fellowship for BIPOC scholars.
    - Ensure researchers on the team are either from the population of interest or have had close relationships with the target research demographic.
  - Seek out networking and collaboration opportunities to bridge sex education and healthcare fields.
- **Include and recognize communities** in the research and funding process:
  - Host focus groups and listen to the community; what you think the issue is might not be the actual issue.
    - Ensure people of color on the project have the ability to influence the process.
    - Ensure that recruitment and data collection methods are accessible to everyone.
  - Engage youth from the beginning so that questions being asked are relevant to BIPOC youth.
    - Support mentorships for BIPOC youth to become sex educators who work for their communities.
    - Recognize and acknowledge the lived experiences of participants.

**Conduct research with an intersectional framework to address and combat systemic racism.**



- **Make improvements in research methods:**
  - Conduct retrospective studies on K-12 students who received CSE and students who did not to compare outcomes.
  - Move away from RCT when conducting research into the effectiveness of sex education.
    - Shift from quantitative research to qualitative research.
    - When quantitative research is conducted, ensure that it measures outcomes beyond unwanted pregnancy and STI prevention.
  - Look at process evaluation instead of just focusing on outcomes at the end.
  - Use social media for data collection and communicating information to overcome gatekeeping.
- **Partner with corporate funders** to conduct research that both addresses their company agenda, like brand recognition and public opinion, as well as the agenda of researchers. ■





Honestly I think a huge barrier in research in general is the **gatekeeping**; (...) not getting enough people who are actually **disproportionately impacted** by the things that we're (...) examining in our research.

**Myeshia Price**

Senior Research Scientist at The Trevor Project





**For too long, adolescent sexual health and comprehensive sex education research and academic study has remained focused on unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection rates as core measures.**

However, increasingly, advocates, administrators, and the general public seek solutions to global conversations on sexual violence prevention, LGBTQ rights, teaching consent, gender equality, child sexual assault prevention, among other concerns for living respectfully and healthily in our increasingly diverse world. The evidence shows that comprehensive sex education is an effective strategy to teach young people the personal relationship skills, health information, and critical thinking strategies to address these social needs. Adopting these recommendations for expanded and improved adolescent sexual health and sex education program effectiveness research and study will produce more representative and needed data. This in turn will support public policy and program implementation that actually serve young people. ■

**The evidence shows that comprehensive sex education is an effective strategy to teach young people the personal relationship skills, health information, and critical thinking strategies to address these social needs.**





**FoSE, a collaboration of Advocates for Youth, Answer, and SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change seeks to create a national dialogue about **the future of sex education** and to promote the institutionalization of comprehensive sexuality education in public schools.**

**> View Our Work**

