

**When discussing policy changes related to sex education, we are often discussing decisions that will most directly impact young people. It is therefore not only sensible, but absolutely essential that the voices of young people are prioritized when making decisions that could alter the course of their educational and life experiences.**

Young people are not only the most affected by sex education policies, but they are also in a position to offer valuable insight into what school programs and climates are like for students and how responsive, or unresponsive, they are to their needs.

This toolkit is designed to be a reference for young people who want to get involved and advocate for positive change in their schools, communities, or even their entire state.

## Advocating for Change

Do you feel there is an issue within your school's sex education program? Or maybe your state's sex education requirements? Here are steps you can take to advocate for change:

### Define the Issue

Identify exactly what you feel needs to change in your school or community. You should be as clear and specific as possible—if you do not like something about the current curriculum, what would you like to see instead? Or, if there is something missing for the curriculum, what exactly would you like to see included?

There may be one issue, or a list of things you want to change. It may be helpful to write these out in order to gather your thoughts and ensure that you and your supporters are all on the same page.

## Identify Your Allies

Find out if other students at your school or in your district feel the same way you do. It is highly likely that there are other students who share the same concerns, but who just haven't spoken up yet. The more people you have taking action alongside you, the better chance you have of achieving your goals.

Here are strategies to gauge support from fellow students:

1. Create a survey.
  - A student survey can help you determine what kind of support you have behind your cause. Students may be more honest in a survey—especially if it's anonymous—than they would be if asked to share their opinions in front of other students or faculty. Surveys can be administered on your own, or with the help of a local organization that focuses on sex education.



### EXAMPLE:

Here are some examples of what survey questions could look like:

- Do you find the sex education classes useful? Why or why not?
- What, if any, topics do you think are missing from our sex education instruction?
- Do you think our school should spend more or less time on sex education?
- Do you think the sex education instruction meets the needs of LGBTQ+ students?
- What, if anything, would you change about sex education at this school?

## 2. Use social media.

- Social media can be a great way to raise awareness for an issue, share your experiences, identify supporters, or start a movement. More tips about using social media to advocate for a cause can be found in our [Digital Advocacy Toolkit](#).

### Identify Your Target Audience

Keep in mind that the audience you are trying to convince to take your side are the people who are on the fence about your particular issue—not your strong opposition. Your message should therefore be targeted towards people who just need a little more convincing. For matters concerning school programs and policies, your audience will most often consist of a combination of fellow students, parents, and school board members.

### Have a Clear Ask

Regardless of the method of communication or who you are communicating with, your ask should always be two things: clear and concise. You do not have to say everything and actually risk losing the attention of your audience by giving them too much information to process. Instead, determine 2–3 key changes to highlight across all forms of chosen communication methods.

Be sure to highlight that the change you are pushing for will benefit ALL young people, not just the people who already agree with you. Once again, the main group of people you are trying to convince are the ones that are skeptical, but not strongly opposed, and therefore can be persuaded to support your cause with a clear enough argument.

### Spread the Word

Once again, the more people you have taking action alongside you the better. There are a number of strategies you can use to raise awareness amongst fellow students and communicate to parents, the school board, and any other decision makers why a change is needed.

### Using Social Media

Social media accounts like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram can be used to communicate quickly with many people. They can be useful in organizing events, gathering fellow students opinions on the state of sex education programs, and keeping interested followers updated on the status of your movement. As always, be mindful of what you post on the internet and keep updates professional.

Here are a few tips to get you started. You can also refer to our Digital Advocacy Toolkit for information on how to effectively use social media for advocacy efforts.

#### Take advantage of platform features, such as hashtags.

Hashtags can help spread the word about your cause and allow you to organize. Using existing hashtags (such as *#SexEd*) associate your action with other similar causes may get the attention of people already following these topics.

#### Engage with accounts that share your goals.

This will help you build a community and gather support for your cause.

#### Do your research first.

When using social media for your cause, you are taking on the responsibility of sharing accurate and relevant information. Take the time to find reliable sources when seeking out statistics or other evidence for posts.

#### Identify and target changemakers in your community.

Engaging with elected officials and targeted members of the school board through a planned social media campaign heightens awareness of the advancements you want to see as well as the decision makers who influence those changes.



## CASE STUDY:

Chanel Contos, a former high school student in Sydney, Australia started an online petition in 2020 to bolster support for increased instruction on consent in sex education courses. The campaign, [\*Teach Us Consent\*](#), began when Contos had a conversation with close friends about their own experiences with sexual assault and violence while growing up. Shocked by their similar experiences, she then created a petition on social media calling for improved consent education in Australian schools. It was soon met with thousands of signatures and hundreds of personal testimonies as it spread among young people across the country. Currently, the campaign has over 43,000 signatures and nearly 7,000 testimonies. The campaign garnered global attention with its revealing and sobering testimonies. Major networks such as [BBC News](#) reported on Contos' successful campaign, and she was even [reported](#) to meet with Prime minister Scott Morrison to discuss education reforms related to rape culture and consent.

The global recognition that Contos' campaign received not only demonstrates the reaching effects of social media, but the power young people have when they band together to advocate for the comprehensive sex education they deserve.

### Testifying at School Board Meetings

Many school boards will allow both parents and students to speak at their meetings to share their opinions on school issues. This is a great opportunity to express your concerns about sex education programs or other related matters. Make sure you come prepared to clearly express the issue and make your ask. It can be helpful to share relevant statistics or coordinate a group of students to demonstrate support for this particular issue.

Hearing about students' experiences from the students themselves can make an exceptional impact. It can be even more impactful hearing from multiple students who are expressing the same grievances. Consider coordinating your testimony with other students in order to ensure key points are emphasized and your asks are clear.

### Writing Opinion Editorials (Op Eds)

Submitting an op ed to your local newspaper can be a great way to raise awareness about your issue and to express to readers what they should do about it. Your op ed should clearly state what the issue is, what readers should do about it, and how representatives or the school board should vote on related pieces of legislation (if applicable). For example, if you believe that the sex education curriculum should include matters of consent, and there is a bill introduced that would require this in your state or district, then you should encourage readers to contact representatives about supporting this bill.



## Tips for Writing an Op Ed

1. Follow the guidelines.
  - Most newspapers have word limits, formatting requirements, standards of story relevance, and specific guidelines on how to submit your op ed. Make sure to follow these guidelines so your work is not passed up before it is even read.
2. Keep it concise—most newspapers limit their op eds to around 500–750 words. Avoid jargon and lengthy analysis. You should select 2–3 key points that answer:
  - What is the issue?
  - What does this issue matter to readers?
  - What should the reader do about the issue?
3. Be assertive.
  - As a student yourself, you are an excellent reference for what students want and need out of their sex education. A confident tone will better persuade readers to answer your call to action.

### Examples of local organizations include:

- 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
- Reproductive health care advocacy organizations
- HIV/AIDS organizations
- Health care providers
- Faith-based organizations
- LGBTQ+ organizations

## Creating Your Own Coalition

There is strength in numbers, and forming a formal advocacy group or club of students who support your cause creates visibility among your peers and community members. Creating a student advocacy group entails creating a name that you want your cause to be recognized by, an accessible document listing your mission, vision, and values, and even creating a logo and social media presence all help identify you and your peers as an organized group of students who are working towards one common goal.

Further, many local organizations would be more than happy to work with youth advocating for improved sex education in their schools. Reach out to organizations that work with youth or have a strong interest in your issue to determine what services they can offer to your cause and if they are willing to aid in your efforts.

## Contacting Your Representatives

Sometimes the best way to persuade a representative to vote a specific way on a bill is to get in touch with them directly. This could be either in-person, via email, or even through a handwritten letter. Below, we provide some guidance on how to go about each of these methods.

### In-Person Meetings

Sometimes, the most effective way to get your message to an elected official is to meet with them in person. This option allows for a little more time and flexibility to discuss your concerns, but you should still come prepared to present your case in an efficient manner. Here are some guidelines to follow when meeting with an elected official in person:

- Prepare your ask beforehand. It may be helpful to rehearse stating why the issue is important to you and making your ask in front of an audience before your meeting.

- Have facts and anecdotes to back up your position.
- Research your opposition so you can anticipate proposed counterarguments and address them.
- If you are meeting the elected official with a group, divide up roles ahead of time and identify a leader to kick off the meeting.

## Phone Calls

Another option is to call the office of your elected official. You will most likely end up speaking with a member of their staff, but they keep detailed records of the calls they receive. Keep your call brief—introduce yourself and then get right explaining your concern and what it is you would like the elected official to do.

Here is an example phone script:

Guidelines	What you say
Share your name and make it clear you are a constituent (you live in their district)	<i>Hello, my name is [insert your name]. I am a constituent from [insert the appropriate district], [insert your zip code].</i>
State the specific sex education issue	<i>I am calling to ask [insert the elected official's name] to support/oppose [insert a specific sex education issue].</i>
Tell the elected official exactly what you would like them to do about the specific sex education issue	<i>Please vote ["Yes" or "No"] on [specific legislation or policy change, ex: requiring medically accurate sex education].</i>
End the call on a positive note	<i>Thank you for supporting young people in [state]!</i>

## Emailing Representatives

When writing an email to your representative, there are a few guidelines you'll want to be sure to follow:

1. Include the bill number of concern in your opening sentence.
2. Keep it concise.
  - Briefly introduce yourself and make it clear you are a constituent. Representatives want to hear from people who live in their district.
  - State why you support/oppose the bill.
  - State why the representative should care about this issue.
  - Tell the representative exactly how you want them to vote on the issue.
3. Say everything in the body of the email—don't include attachments.
4. Don't copy and paste multiple representatives or send a mass email.

## Printed Letters or Postcards

Sometimes, the best way to reach your representative is the old fashioned way. This may be a particular representative's preferred form of contact, or you just may want to take advantage of the personal touch that mailed letters or postcards offer that cannot be achieved in an email. The general guidelines for a printed letter are nearly identical to that of writing an email. You can find out how to contact any elected official in the U.S. [here](#).



## CASE STUDY:

There are real life success stories of young people changing the course of sex education in their states. In 2018, Maryland Delegate Ariana Kelly championed [House Bill 251](#), with the support of her teenage daughter and her peers. The bill requires sex education curriculum to include instruction on the meaning of consent and respect for personal boundaries. Kelly and her daughter drafted the bill together after concluding it did not make sense to include this component of sex education along with what is already in the curriculum. After repeated unsuccessful attempts in 2016, the bill passed in the 2018 legislative session.

Having a parent who is a Delegate was helpful in advocating for this policy change in this story, but it is certainly not a necessity. Young people—like Kelly's daughter—offer perspectives that parents and teachers cannot. As students, you are the only ones that experience sex education through a student's point-of-view, and this can provide enlightening information to elected officials and potentially persuade them to support your cause.

### In Their Own Words...

“ Although the sex education at my public high school was relatively comprehensive, I was deeply disappointed in the lack of affirming information about LGBTQIA+ people and experiences. As a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, I didn't have access to comprehensive information that addressed my relationships and lived experiences. As I did more research into Virginia's sex education system, I learned that there were many localities with even worse curricula because Virginia's sex education guidelines essentially allow localities to teach whatever they want.

My journey with sex education reform began during my senior year in high school in 2017. With no kind of advocacy experience, it was difficult to know where to start. I needed to learn more about sex education, so I did *a lot* of research. I assembled a 20-page report about sex education in Virginia and the research that supports comprehensive reform. Then, I emailed one of my state legislators and requested a meeting. We met at a diner, went through the report page by page, and reviewed the legislation I proposed. Soon after that meeting, he submitted the first bill that would have reformed Virginia's sex education by simply making the curriculum mandatory.

After the legislation that I authored in 2017 and 2018 failed in the Virginia General Assembly, I co-founded the Virginia Coalition for sex education Reform (VACSER). Since 2018, VACSER's mission has been to build a broad coalition in support of legislative reform of Virginia's sex education. Driven by the belief that every student has the right to access medically-accurate, inclusive, and comprehensive information about themselves, VACSER has brought together organizations of all sizes in support of the Virginia Healthy Youth Act of 2022. Although it can be easy to feel discouraged, I am constantly amazed by the support that we find and I am hopeful for the future! ■

#### **Graham Weinschenk**

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VACSER*

This handout is an excerpt from our Community Action Toolkit. For more information on creating change in your community, get the full guide!

[Download the Toolkit →](#)