

# State Profiles

## Arkansas State Profile



### Arkansas's State of Sex Ed

Sex education is not currently mandated in Arkansas, but if offered, it must stress abstinence. If instruction on dating violence is taught, it must be evidence-based.

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Sex Ed Requirement



Sex Ed Content



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## Current Requirement

- Arkansas schools are **not** required to teach sex education or instruction on HIV or STIs.
  - If sex education is offered, the 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.
- Students are required to complete 0.5 units of health and safety in order to graduate.

## RECENT LEGISLATION SHAPING THE STATE LANDSCAPE

In 2021, Arkansas enacted two regressive bills related to sex education despite advocates best efforts. [House Bill 1592](#), prohibits public schools or open-enrollment public charter schools from entering into any type of transaction with an individual or entity that provides abortion care, effectively preventing sex educators from Planned Parenthood from providing instruction and threatening students' ability to receive this important information. Additionally, [Senate Bill 389](#) requires parental notification if sex education, or instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity, is provided. Curriculum must also be made

available for inspection. While appearing to increase “parental rights,” in reality this bill stigmatizes the vital and important information provided under sex education and infringes upon young people’s right to access this education to help them make healthy, informed decisions for themselves. In February 2023, Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed [SB 294](#) into law which prohibits teachers from instructing on sexually explicit materials, sexual reproduction, sexual intercourse, gender identity; or sexual orientation prior to 5th grade, severely limiting sexual health education. Further, [SB 384](#) was signed into law and requires an adoption awareness curriculum which among other things requires that the “reasons adoption is preferable to abortion” is taught. Quality sex education may discuss alternatives to pregnancy outcomes but it must include nonjudgmental and impartial instruction on abortion care. This bill intends to further stigmatize critically important access to abortion care.

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. Local control over sex education presents unique challenges that have resulted in glaring disparities 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 LGBTQAI+ youth, and presents further challenges in ensuring that low income districts have access to the resources needed to implement sex education.

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. Advocates are encouraged to take action on pending legislation that seeks to advance or restrict the principles of sex education. For a current overview of pending legislation, see table below. 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 and to reach out to [EducateUS](#) to get connected to local advocacy groups.

# More on sex ed in Arkansas...

## State Law: A Closer Look

Arkansas law does not require schools to teach sex education, 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.

In 2023, [SB 294](#) was enacted into law as an amendment to [Arkansas Code. § 6-16-157](#) and states the following:

“Before grade five (5), a public school teacher shall not provide classroom instruction on the following topics:

(1) Sexually explicit materials;

(2) Sexual reproduction;

(3) Sexual intercourse;

(4) Gender identity; or

(5) Sexual orientation.”

Additionally, in 2023, [SB 384](#) was enacted into law as [Arkansas Code. § 6-16-161](#) and states the following:

**(1)** Beginning with the 2023-2024 school year, each public school in the state shall provide instruction on adoption awareness to students enrolled in grades six through twelve (6-12) at the public school for a period of time not to exceed one (1) hour during each school year.

**(2)**

**(A)** A public school shall provide the one (1) hour of adoption awareness instruction required under subdivision (a)(1) of this section at the beginning of each school year.

**(B)** A public school may require that the adoption awareness instruction required under subdivision (a)(1) of this section is provided:

**(i)** During a regular class period; or

**(ii)** At a special event organized for purposes of providing the required adoption awareness instruction.

**(b)** The State Board of Education shall develop curricula, standards, materials, and units relating to adoption awareness instruction required by subsection (a) of this section.

**(c)** Adoption awareness instruction required by subsection (a) of this section shall include without limitation:

**(1)** The benefits of adoption to society;

- (2) The types of adoption available;
- (3) The difference between adoption through the foster care system and private adoption;
- (4) The reasons adoption is preferable to abortion;
- (5) Public and private resources and agencies available to assist in the adoption process;
- (6) Statistical data on abortion, adoption, and childbirth;
- (7) Public and private resources available for pregnant mothers and parents enrolled in a public school; and
- (8) A description of child and human development.

## 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 Legislation

State legislative activity related to sex education does not take place in isolation from the broader embroiled political and policy climate. In 2022, a national wave of attacks on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQAI+) individuals, attempts to restrict or prohibit instruction on “divisive concepts” such as “Critical Race Theory” (which is not taught in public schools), and efforts to limit access to abortion care and other reproductive healthcare services swept the country in an effort to prevent students from receiving sex education and accessing sexual and reproductive healthcare services. Below are highlights of current legislative activity related to these topics. **Arkansas’ 2024 annual legislative session convenes April 10, 2024.**

# 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' Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) results, [click here](#). At the time of publication, the 2021 YRBS data was not made available yet.

## Arkansas School Health Profiles Data

In 2022, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released the 2020 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 22 sexual health education topics](#) as critical for ensuring a young person's sexual health. Below are key instruction highlights for secondary schools in Arkansas as [reported](#) for the 2019–2020 school year.

### **Reported teaching all 22 critical sexual health education topics**

- 27.4% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students all 22 critical sexual health education topics in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 40.4% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students all 22 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**

- 79.8% 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.
- 96.8% 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**

- 75.5% 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.
- 95.0% 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**

- 80.1% 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.
- 94.6% 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**

- 71.0% 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.
- 87.7% 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**

- 34.9% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students how to correctly use a condom in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 53.6% 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**



- 53.9% 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.
- 78.3% 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 diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities**

- 38.8% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students about diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 59.6% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students about diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

### **Reported teaching about how gender roles and stereotypes affect goals, decision-making, and relationships**

- 54.8% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students about gender roles and stereotypes in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 72.8% of Arkansas secondary schools taught students about gender roles and stereotypes 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**

- 46.3% 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](#).**