

State Profiles

North Carolina State Profile



North Carolina's State of Sex Ed

North Carolina schools **are** required to teach sex education through “comprehensive health education”.

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Sex Ed Requirements



Sex Ed Content



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Current Requirement

- Curriculum is not required to be comprehensive and must explain the benefits of abstinence.
- Curriculum is not required to include instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity. However, the curriculum must teach that a “faithful monogamous heterosexual marriage is the best lifelong means of avoiding STDs”.
- Curriculum is not required to include instruction on consent.
- Parents and guardians must have the ability to either exempt their children from any portion of sex education instruction through written notification to the school principal or to give written permission for their children to participate in sex education instruction, depending on the school district. [These are referred to as “opt-out” and “opt-in” policies, respectively.](#)
- Curriculum must be medically accurate.

RECENT LEGISLATION SHAPING THE STATE LANDSCAPE

In 2009, advocates successfully passed a [Healthy Youth Act](#), which mandates medically accurate sex education. While the passage of this bill was a step in the right direction, the legislation contained issues that still need to be addressed, including maintaining an emphasis on abstinence as the expected standard for young people and failing to include instruction on consent. Since then, North Carolina advocates have seen a steady increase in efforts to roll back progress and restrict sex education curriculum across the state in recent years.

In 2022, two harmful bills were introduced to restrict discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in the classroom: [House Bill 755](#) and [House Bill 1067](#). While unsuccessful, this legislation harms both LGBTQAI+ students and the ability of educators to teach inclusive sex education.

Throughout the state the lack of a stronger policy is evident. For example, the Healthy Youth Act requires students in grades 7-9 to receive medically accurate sex education that includes instruction on abstinence, contraceptives, STD prevention, and sexual assault. However, advocates have found that instruction ranges from evidence-based curriculum to abstinence-only (also called “sexual risk avoidance” programs) in direct violation of North Carolina statute. 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 LGBTQ youth, and presents further challenges in ensuring that low income districts have access to the resources needed to implement sex education.

Advocates note that school accountability, culturally responsive instruction geared towards youth of color, inclusion of topics concerning sexual orientation and gender identity, and a defined comprehensive approach to teaching sex education is needed. Additionally, increased community support and an increased ability to address myths and concerns regarding sex education is needed to advance sex education curriculum statewide.

Right now, advocates can take action to ensure young people in their community have access to quality sex education. After contacting their local education agencies (LEAs), 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 ensure that the Healthy Youth Act stays intact, additional accountability measures are implemented, and that legislators work to advance requirements for sex education curriculum in North Carolina. Advocates are encouraged to use the SIECUS [Community Action Toolkit](#) to guide local efforts to advance sex

education and to reach out to [EducateUS](#) to get connected to local advocacy groups..

More on sex ed in North Carolina..

State Law: A Closer Look

North Carolina [General Statutes § 115C-81.25](#) and [115C-81.30](#) require schools to teach a comprehensive health education program, which includes instruction on the prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Schools must stress the importance of parental involvement and teach refusal skills and strategies to handle peer pressure. Comprehensive health education must include “reproductive health and safety education” beginning in seventh grade. Such instruction must teach “that abstinence from sexual activity outside of marriage is the expected standard for all school-age children” and “that a mutually faithful, monogamous, heterosexual relationship in the context of marriage is the best lifelong means of avoiding [STDs], including HIV/AIDS,” among other stipulations. With respect to contraception and family planning, the law requires instruction to teach:

- “... how [STDs] are and are not transmitted, the effectiveness and safety of all federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved methods of reducing the risk of contracting [STDs], and information on local resources for testing and medical care for [STDs] ...; and
- The effectiveness and safety of all FDA-approved contraceptive methods in preventing pregnancy.”

The information included in reproductive health and safety education must be age-appropriate, objective, and based upon scientific research that is peer reviewed and accepted by professionals in the field of sexual health education. Students may receive information about where to obtain contraceptives and abortion referral services only in accordance with a local board’s policy regarding parental consent. Contraceptives, including condoms and other devices, shall not be made available or distributed on school property. Instruction must also teach

“awareness of sexual assault, sexual abuse, and risk reduction” and focus on healthy relationships.

The State Board of Education shall make available a list of reviewed materials, any approved textbooks and other approved materials for discussion regarding pregnancy and STDs, including HIV prevention, to parents and legal guardians at least 60 days before such instruction is provided in the classroom.

North Carolina law also requires local school boards to “adopt policies to provide opportunities either for parents and legal guardians to consent or for parents and legal guardians to withhold their consent for the students’ participation in any or all of these programs.” *These are referred to as “opt-in” and “opt-out” policies*, respectively.

State Standards

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction provides *Healthful Living: Health Education Essential Standards*, which offers model policies and content outlines. Essential standards in this guideline include the skill to “evaluate abstinence from sexual intercourse as a positive choice for young people” and to “create strategies that develop and maintain reproductive and sexual health,” such as “illustrat[ing] skills related to safe and effective use of methods to prevent STDs, as well as access resources for testing and treatment.”

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. **North Carolina’s 2023 annual session convenes January 11, 2023.**

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

North Carolina 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 North Carolina as reported for the 2019–2020 school year.

Reported teaching all 22 critical sexual health education topics

- 29.1% of North Carolina secondary schools taught students all 22 critical sexual health education topics in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 46.1% of North Carolina 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

- 75.3% of North Carolina secondary schools taught students about the benefits of being sexually abstinent in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 81.6% of North Carolina 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

- 70% of North Carolina 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.
- 80.8% of North Carolina 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

- 78.4% of North Carolina 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.
- 81.5% of North Carolina 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

- 58.4% of North Carolina 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.
- 80.9% of North Carolina 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.

Reported teaching how to correctly use a condom

- 41.5% of North Carolina secondary schools taught students how to correctly use a condom in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 54.3% of North Carolina 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

- 61.8% of North Carolina secondary schools taught students about methods of contraception other than condoms in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 72.1% of North Carolina 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 and gender identity

- 42 % of North Carolina secondary schools taught students about sexual orientation and gender identity in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 56.4% of North Carolina secondary schools taught students about sexual orientation and gender identity 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

- 56.7% of North Carolina secondary schools taught students about gender roles and stereotypes in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 65.1% of North Carolina 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

- 43.4% of North Carolina 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](#).

