

State Profiles

Pennsylvania State Profile



Pennsylvania's State of Sex Ed

Schools in Pennsylvania **are not** required to teach sex education. However, curriculum is required to include instruction on STDs, including HIV.

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Sex Ed Requirements



Sex Ed Content



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Current Requirements

- Curriculum must stress abstinence.
- Curriculum is not required to include instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Curriculum is not required to include instruction on consent.
- School districts must publicize the fact that parents and guardians can review all curriculum materials. Parents and guardians whose principles or religious beliefs conflict with instruction may excuse their children from the programs. **This is referred to as an “opt-out” policy.**
- Pennsylvania has no regulation regarding medically accurate sex education instruction.

RECENT LEGISLATION SHAPING THE STATE LANDSCAPE

In 2022, advocates in Pennsylvania worked hard to advance several initiatives concerning sex education. **Senate Bill 1092**, introduced by Senator Timothy Kearney, sought to mandate consent education in kindergarten through 12th grade. **House Bill 2023**, introduced by Representative Aaron Kaufer, sought to develop an age-appropriate behavioral health education program for K-12 students. House Bill 2023 was “tabled” during the 2022 session, which means it is no longer an active bill but could be considered again at a later date. Lastly, **House Bill 1335** was introduced and sought to require schools to provide sex education that covers a wide variety of topics and allows for parents to opt-out their child if they wish. Unfortunately, the aforementioned bills are considered *sine die*, which means they are essentially dead due to the adjournment of the legislative session.

Additional local efforts to support sex education in Pennsylvania are underway by the [PA Coalition for Sex Education \(PACSE\)](#). At the local level, advocates in Philadelphia worked with the City Council of Philadelphia to advance sex education, and advocates in Pittsburgh pushed the Pittsburgh Public Schools Board of Directors to adopt a sex education curriculum. After years of advocacy, New Voices for Reproductive Justice was able to successfully advocate for the Pittsburgh Public Schools district to adopt a sex education policy.

Sex education is not currently mandated in Pennsylvania. Schools that do teach sex education must emphasize abstinence. Because Pennsylvania 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 LGBTQ 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. Advocates can also increase efforts to ensure that the curriculum being taught is medically accurate and free of stigma and shame. 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, they can then contact their representatives to vocalize the important need for advancing sex education requirements in their community. 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 Pennsylvania...

State Law: A Closer Look

Schools in Pennsylvania are not required to teach sex education. [Pennsylvania Constitutional Statutes Title 22 § 4.29](#), however, require primary, intermediate, middle, and high schools to teach sexually transmitted disease (STD), including human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), education. Primary schools are allowed to omit instruction on the sexual methods of disease transmission. Schools must use materials that have been determined by the local school district to be age-appropriate, discuss prevention, and stress abstinence as “the only completely reliable means of preventing sexual transmission.”

School districts must publicize the fact that parents and guardians can review all curriculum materials. Parents and guardians whose principles or religious beliefs conflict with instruction may excuse their children from the programs. [This is referred to as an “opt-out” policy.](#)

State Standards

The state has created [the Academic Standards for Health, Safety, and Physical Education](#), which include STD and HIV prevention education. All decisions regarding HIV prevention curricula and materials must be made by local school districts. School districts do not have to follow a specific curriculum, but they must use these standards as a framework for the development of their curricula.

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. **Pennsylvania’s 2023 full-time legislative session convenes January 3, 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 Pennsylvania's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) results, [click here](#). At the time of publication, 2021 YRBS results were not made available yet.

Pennsylvania 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 Pennsylvania as [reported](#) for the 2019–2020 school year.

Reported teaching all 22 critical sexual health education topics

- 13.8% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students all 22 critical sexual health education topics in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 34.9% of Pennsylvania 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

- 67.8% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students about the benefits of being sexually abstinent in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 89.2% of Pennsylvania 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

- 56.5% of Pennsylvania 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.
- 86.9% of Pennsylvania 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

- 66.9% of Pennsylvania 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.
- 87.2% of Pennsylvania 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

- 48.8% of Pennsylvania 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.
- 84.8% of Pennsylvania 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

- 21.4% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students how to correctly use a condom in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 46.5% of Pennsylvania 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

- 37.3% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students about methods of contraception other than condoms in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 69.4% of Pennsylvania 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

- 32.3% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students about sexual orientation and gender identity in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 62.0% of Pennsylvania 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

- 40.9% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students about gender roles and stereotypes in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 66.7% of Pennsylvania secondary schools taught students about gender roles and stereotypes in a required course in any of grades 9, 10, 11, or 12.

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](#).

