

State Profiles

Tennessee State Profile



Tennessee's State of Sex Ed

Certain Tennessee schools **are** required to teach only abstinence through "family life education".

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Sex Ed Requirements



Sex Ed Content



**State
Profile
Sections**

Current Requirement

Recent Legislation

More on Sex Ed

Bill Tracker

Current Requirement

- Local education agencies (LEAs) in Tennessee counties whose pregnancy rate exceeds 19.5 pregnancies per 1,000 females ages 15–17 are required to develop and implement a family life education program promoting “sexual risk avoidance” and prohibiting “gateway sexual activity”.
- Curriculum is not required to include instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Curriculum is not required on affirmative consent
- Parents and guardians must be notified at least 30 days prior to commencing any instruction involving sexual orientation or gender identity and are able to remove their children from sex education instruction upon written request. **This is referred to as an “opt-out” policy.**
- Curriculum must be medically accurate.
- Educators who violate the “Gateway Law”, which prohibits family life education programs and sex education courses from including instruction on “gateway sexual activity” that encourages youth to engage in “non-abstinent behavior”, could face punitive measures including a \$500 fine

RECENT LEGISLATION SHAPING THE STATE LANDSCAPE

Advocates in Tennessee have fought to advance sex education requirements across the state over the past few years, against many oppositional attacks. In 2017, **Senate Bill 1510**, sponsored by Senator Becky Duncan Massey, passed into law. This legislation requires sexual abuse education in schools. Additionally, **House Bill 577/Senate Bill 1392** in 2021 were enacted which require instruction on

contraception to be medically accurate and age-appropriate while being in compliance with state statute and academic standards.

Unfortunately, 2021 was a difficult year for advocates fighting against multiple significant efforts to restrict sex education. These included [Senate Bill 1360](#), a bill that was enacted into law which requires all local education agencies (LEAs) to provide family life education. This family life education, however, is actually “abstinence-only” instruction. Further, [Senate Bill 3310](#), a restrictive measure known as the “Gateway Law”, also passed in 2021. Under this legislation, Family Life Education programs and sex education courses are prohibited from including instruction on “gateway sexual activity” that encourages youth to engage in “non-abstinent behavior.” Educators who fail to comply can face punitive measures, including a \$500 fine. Additionally, Tennessee further restricted access to sex education with [House Bill/Senate Bill 1229](#) which requires schools to provide parental notification at least 30 days prior to commencing instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in any subject and permits parents to opt their children out of such instruction.

Additionally, in 2022, [House Bill 2557](#) was enacted which prohibits schools from allowing entities who perform, provide referrals for, advocate for, or promote abortions from teaching family life education curriculum. Advocates expect additional aggressive legislative attacks on sexual and reproductive rights such as on protections for transgender youth, as well as banning access to abortion care, in 2023.

In addition to working to rescind the recent onslaught of detrimental laws and renew efforts to pass positive sex education requirements statewide, advocates note that much needs to be done at the local level as well. Since Tennessee schools are required to provide “family life education”, which is effectively abstinence-only instruction, often called “[sexual risk avoidance](#)” programming, school districts are left without the necessary support to provide quality sex education to young people.

Right now, advocates need to take action and defend against legislative attacks on the sexual and reproductive health rights of young people in Tennessee, including defending their right to quality sex education. Advocates should identify what sex education requirements are currently in place in their district and advocate for the inclusion of specific elements of sex education, such as requiring curriculum to be culturally responsive to youth of color and LGBTQ youth. Advocates are encouraged to take action on pending legislation that

seeks to advance or restrict the principles of comprehensive sex education. For a current overview of pending legislation, see table below. 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 Tennessee...

State Law: A Closer Look

Tennessee law ([§ 49-6-1302](#), [49-6-1304](#), and [49-6-1305](#)) requires local education agencies to develop and implement a family life education program. These programs must promote “sexual risk avoidance” as their primary goal, and instruction that promotes “gateway sexual activity” is prohibited. [Statute § 49-6-1304](#) was recently amended to include “provid[ing] instruction on the detection, intervention, prevention, and treatment of child sexual abuse, including such abuse that may occur in the home” as a required topic in family life curricula.

If such family life education programs are provided, they must:

1. Emphatically promote sexual risk avoidance through abstinence, regardless of a student’s current or prior sexual experience;
2. Encourage sexual health by helping students understand how sexual activity affects the whole person, including the physical, social, emotional, psychological, economic, and educational consequences of non-marital sexual activity;
3. Teach the positive results of avoiding sexual activity, the skills needed to make healthy decisions, the advantages of and skills for student success in pursuing educational and life goals, the components of healthy relationships, and the social science research supporting the benefits of reserving the expression of human sexual activity for marriage;
4. Provide factually and medically accurate information;
5. Teach students how to form pro-social habits that enable students to develop healthy relationships, create strong marriages, and form safe and stable future families;

6. Encourage students to communicate with a parent, guardian, or other trusted adult about sex or other risk behaviors;
7. Assist students in learning and practicing refusal skills that will help them resist sexual activity;
8. Address the benefits of raising children within the context of a marital relationship and the unique challenges that single teen parents encounter in relation to educational, psychological, physical, social, legal, and financial factors;
9. Discuss the interrelationship between teen sexual activity and exposure to other risk behaviors such as smoking, underage drinking, drug use, criminal activity, dating violence, and sexual aggression;
10. Educate students on the age of consent, puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, sexually transmitted diseases [STDs], including but not limited to human immunodeficiency virus [HIV]/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome [AIDS], and the financial and emotional responsibility of raising a child;
11. Teach students how to identify and form healthy relationships, and how to identify and avoid unhealthy relationships;
12. Inform students, in all [schools], concerning the process of adoption and its benefits; and
13. Provide instruction on the detection, intervention, prevention, and treatment of child sexual abuse, including such abuse that may occur in the home.

Tennessee Code allows students to be removed from sex education classes upon written request from their parent or guardian. **This is referred to as an “opt-out” policy.**

Beginning in the 2021-2022 school year, according to **Public Chapter 290**, a local education agency (LEA) must adopt and implement a family life education curriculum aligned with legal guidelines for such a program.

State Standards

The *Tennessee Health Education Standards* include instruction on sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS, beginning in grade 3.

Beginning in grade 6, the standards include the expectation that students will learn to “identify abstinence from sexual activity as the responsible and preferred choice for adolescents.” The *Tennessee Lifetime Wellness Curriculum Standards*, which students must complete in order to graduate high school, mandate a

section on sexuality and relationships. The standards describe abstinence as a “positive choice” but also include instruction on contraception.

State Legislation

State legislative activity related to sex education does not take place in isolation from the broader embroiled political and policy climate. Attacks on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ) individuals, attempts to restrict or prohibit instruction on “divisive concepts” such as Critical Race Theory, and efforts to limit access to abortion care and other reproductive health care services prevent students from receiving comprehensive sex education and accessing sexual and reproductive health care services. Below are highlights of current legislative activity related to these topics. **Tennessee’s 2022 session convened on January 11, 2022.**

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

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

Reported teaching all 22 critical sexual health education topics

- 22% of Tennessee secondary schools taught students all 22 critical sexual health education topics in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 32.4% of Tennessee 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

- 53.3% of Tennessee secondary schools taught students about the benefits of being sexually abstinent in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 91.1% of Tennessee 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

- 47.2% of Tennessee 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.
- 84.9% of Tennessee 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

- 50.4% of Tennessee 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.
- 93.2% of Tennessee 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

- 43% of Tennessee 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.

- 79.3% of Tennessee 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

- 24.4% of Tennessee secondary schools taught students how to correctly use a condom in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 39.7% of Tennessee 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

- 32.3% of Tennessee secondary schools taught students about methods of contraception other than condoms in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 67.5% of Tennessee 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

- 33% of Tennessee secondary schools taught students about sexual orientation and gender identity in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 56.7% of Tennessee 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

- 36.6% of Tennessee secondary schools taught students about gender roles and stereotypes in a required course in any of grades 6, 7, or 8.
- 67.3% of Tennessee 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

- 35.2% of Tennessee 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](#).

