

Community Action Toolkit

A Guide to Advancing Sex Education in Your Community





About SIECUS

SIECUS believes sexuality—due to its intrinsic value as well as its importance to individual and collective health—is worthy of our utmost attention, public discourse, thoughtful instruction, and societal respect.

For the past 54 years, SIECUS has made strides in ensuring young people's positive and healthy sexual development through several different strategies thereby promoting and increasing lifelong health and well-being. To continue to gain ground on fulfilling this mission, we stand for:

- nationwide commitment to comprehensive sexuality education in schools;
- more and better trained teachers delivering this education;
- stronger policies that support both comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and
- reproductive health, rights, and justice; and
- a public that is better informed about sexual and reproductive health and rights issues.

Fulfilling the above objectives, in context and over time, will enable us to realize our vision of a sexually healthy world where individuals:

- Appreciate their own bodies.
- Interact with all genders in respectful and appropriate ways.

- Affirm their own sexual orientation and respect the sexual orientations of others.
- Develop and maintain meaningful relationships.
- Make informed and autonomous choices about family planning options.
- Develop and practice effective critical-thinking and decision-making skills.
- Express their sexuality in ways that are congruent with their values.
- Practice health-promoting behaviors, such as scheduling regular physical exams, using contraception effectively, avoiding contracting or transmitting STIs, and communicating effectively with partners about their needs, wants, and desires.
- Enjoy and express their sexuality throughout the duration of their lifetime.

To make this vision of lifelong sexual health and well-being a reality, SIECUS focuses its policy and advocacy work on ensuring young people receive comprehensive sexuality education that is evidence informed, medically accurate, age- and developmentally-appropriate, culturally competent, LGBTQ inclusive, trauma informed, rights-based and sex-positive. ■

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I.

Introduction

Two decades ago, SIECUS started the Community Advocacy Project in response to calls from individuals facing controversy over sex education in their communities. As decisions regarding sex education were increasingly debated at the state level, SIECUS expanded the project to document controversies about sex education across the country and monitor state legislation.

PHOTO BY
RAPHAEL RENTER

Today, through our expanded state policy work, SIECUS examines state-level sex education policies across the country, carefully tracks state legislation from introduction to passage, provides assistance to individuals and organizations who are advocating for sex education in their state or community, and develops resources and materials to assist advocates in their efforts.

Unfortunately, we have seen that sex education has the potential to become a highly controversial issue in any state or community. Often, a small but vocal group of individuals will organize with the sole purpose of opposing sex education. These opponents may argue for the elimination of all sex education programs or for the institution of an abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) program that censors information and relies on messages of fear and shame.

The good news is that we know from numerous national, state, and local surveys that the vast majority of people in the United States support sex education in schools. The key to overcoming opposition is to tap into this support by making people aware of the facts and providing them with the tools they need to take action.

The *Community Action Toolkit* provides the tools needed to become knowledgeable about sex education, build support in your state or community, work to implement sound policies, and institute or defend effective sex education programs that support and affirm young people's rights to honest information. The *Toolkit* is designed to serve as a resource for all advocates whether they are students, parents, teachers, school administrators, health professionals, youth-serving professionals, policymakers, or concerned community members.

SIECUS designed the *Toolkit* so that advocates can either use select components as standalone resources or for the *Toolkit* to be used in its entirety—depending on the individual need. While this means that some information, ideas, and suggestions may reappear throughout the *Toolkit*, we believe that this ultimately makes it more useful.

It is our sincere hope that you will find the *Community Action Toolkit* to be a valuable resource in your advocacy efforts. If you have questions or need additional information, SIECUS is always available to help. Call us at 202-265-2405 or email info@siecus.org for further assistance. ■



II.

Why Get Involved?

SIECUS has been advocating for sound policies and programs related to sex education for over 50 years. We understand that this is not always an easy task. Discussions about sexuality, especially adolescent sexuality, often evoke strong personal opinions, feelings of discomfort, and highly charged emotions. For these reasons, an abundance of myths and misunderstandings surrounding sex education have developed over time. This can make advocating for sex education a daunting task.



PHOTO BY
JAKAYLA TONEY

There may come a point in your own efforts when you ask yourself, “Is it worth it? Do I really need to be involved?” In those moments, reminding yourself of the difficult realities our young people face may help you to confirm, “Yes, I need to be involved in this fight.”

Young people are not getting the information they need.

Young people are bombarded with sexual images and messages from television, music, movies, and the internet. Yet when we look at the high rates of unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and dating and sexual violence among young people, it becomes clear that they are not getting the accurate, unbiased information about sexuality and sexual health that they need.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Government, many state-level governments, and numerous school systems across the country utilize abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs. AOUM programs have never been proven effective. These programs pose an overly-simplistic solution to a complex challenge and provide young people with a singular message: avoid all sexual activity.

Typically, AOUM programs do not provide young people with even the most basic information about unintended pregnancy and disease-prevention methods—other than abstinence. In fact, some go so far as to purposefully provide inaccurate or exaggerated information about STIs and contraceptive failure rates. With tactics like these, AOUM programs rely on fear and shame to control young people’s behavior. Additionally,

these programs withhold information and have the potential to harm young people, especially LGBTQ students and survivors of sexual violence.

Young people benefit from comprehensive sexuality education.

In contrast, sex education programs that are comprehensive provide young people with the information they need to make responsible decisions about their sexuality throughout their entire lives. Comprehensive sexuality education focuses on a holistic approach that offers complete, accurate, and age-appropriate information. These programs also help reduce risk of STIs and unintended pregnancy.

Scientific evaluations of sex education, HIV-prevention, and unintended pregnancy prevention programs that provide information on abstinence as well as condoms and contraceptive use have consistently found that these programs cause young people to:

- delay intercourse,
- reduce the frequency of intercourse,
- reduce the number of sexual partners they have, and
- increase condom and contraceptive use.

Young people need your help!

Whether you are a young person yourself, a parent, an educator, a health care provider, a faith leader, a member of the community, or a combination of these, we need you. It is challenging to turn the support that we know exists into organized action.

The good news is that it can be done. And it *has* been done all across in the country—from Hawaii to Florida, Alaska to Mississippi—students, parents, educators, and policymakers have come together to successfully improve sex education in their communities. ■

III.

Sex Education is a Human Right

Sexuality is a fundamental part of who we are; to deny that is to deny a person's humanity. That's why we, as sexual and reproductive health, rights, and justice advocates, must promote sex education not just as a health need but as a human right. Ensuring that all people—and especially young people—have a complete and accurate understanding of how this core part of their identities can shape and affect them is a necessary and moral thing to do.



PHOTO BY
BRIAN KYED



Good sexual health is measured by much more than the absence of disease.

The full range of information provided by comprehensive sexuality education includes key components of health and well-being such as being able to communicate needs, wants, and desires; developing relationships with people; setting boundaries; and learning that you have a right to be treated with dignity and respect, no matter your identity.

The Politics of Sex Education

Sex education has a long history of being politicized. Reading news articles or listening to political debates, one might think that adults cannot come to a consensus on whether schools should provide sex education or take a strict abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) approach.

In fact, when asked, the vast majority of adults, including parents and voters, in this country support sex education, disapprove of the government’s investment in AOUM programs, and reject the popular myth that suggests teaching about sexuality encourages young people to be sexually active.

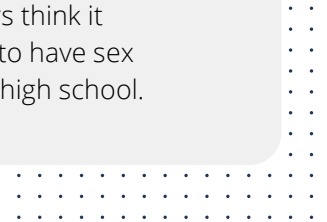
Support for Sex Education

In early 2018, [GfK](#), an international market research organization, conducted a survey on behalf of Planned Parenthood Federation of America. The survey assessed how likely voters feel about sex education and federally-funded programs to prevent unintended teen pregnancy.

What does “overwhelming support” look like?

89% of likely voters think it is important to have sex education in middle school.

98% of likely voters think it is important to have sex education in high school.



The results confirmed what we already know to be true: people overwhelmingly support sex education. In addition, most people also support federal dollars being used to fund programs that reduce unintended pregnancy among young people.

Beyond viewing sex education as important, respondents also agreed that sex education should cover a range of topics including birth control, STIs and HIV, puberty, consent, healthy relationships, sexual orientation, and abstinence.

Finally, the survey shows that most people support federal funding for programs to prevent unintended teen pregnancy including [The Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program \(TPPP\)](#) and the [Personal Responsibility Education Program \(PREP\)](#). There was very little support for federally funded programs that focus only on encouraging teens to delay sex until they are married.

School-Based Sex Education

Parents overwhelmingly support making sex education part of middle and high school curricula. In addition, most parents believe that sex education can help young people make responsible decisions about sexual behavior and sexual health.

In 2014, Gfk commissioned a study that surveyed 1,633 parents—both Democrats and Republicans—to assess their views on sex education in schools. The study found that:

- **More than 93%** of all parents place high importance on the provision of sex education in both middle and high school.
- **More than 89%** of all parents support including a wide range of topics in sex education including puberty, healthy relationships, abstinence, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and birth control in high school.

- **A strong majority** of Republican parents want puberty, healthy relationships, abstinence, STIs as topics included in sex education.

Sex education which includes a broad set of topics represents an area of strong agreement between parents of both political parties.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identifies 19 critical sex education topics that should be included in school-based sex education; however, as of 2017, only 38% of high school students and 14% of middle school students receive all 19 topics.



The Other Side

Opponents of sex education believe that abstinence from all sexual behavior is the only “education” that young people should be getting in schools. SIECUS supports teaching young people about abstinence; SIECUS’s [*Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education; K-12*](#) states that one of the four primary goals of sexuality education is to “help young people exercise responsibility regarding sexual relationships, including abstinence [and] how to resist pressures to become prematurely involved in sexual intercourse.” Abstinence, however, is just one of 39 sexual health topics included in the *Guidelines*.

Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs Ignore Those Most in Need

Although they are often presented to communities and school boards as programs that are designed to prevent unintended pregnancy or HIV and other STIs, abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs consistently ignore many of the young people who are most in need of sexuality information, education, and skills. AOUM programs...

...Exclude Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) youth

LGBTQ students, particularly young men who have sex with men, LGBTQ youth of color, and young transgender women who have sex with men, are at increased risk for HIV and other STIs, yet AOUM programs fail to provide these students with any realistic strategies for protecting themselves from these risks—let alone ensure their overall sexual health and well-being.

AOUM program materials typically only discuss topics related to sexuality within the confines of a heterosexual marriage. Many of these programs also promote stereotypical gender roles that particularly isolate transgender and gender nonconforming young people.

...Erase Youth Who Have Experienced Sexual Trauma

An alarming number of young people in this country are survivors of sexual abuse. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)’s 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBS), 11.3% of female high school students and 3.5% of male high school students report having been forced to have sexual intercourse. And these numbers are likely even higher given the significant underreporting of sexual violence.

Unfortunately, AOUM programs fail to provide this vulnerable group of young people with information or skills that could help them cope with their experiences of abuse. Instead, students are simply told that all sexual activity outside of marriage is wrong and that individuals who engage in sexual activity before marriage are subject to dire consequences such as the inability to bond emotionally with a partner. Such messages are likely to worsen feelings of hurt, shame, anger, and embarrassment in these already isolated young people.

...Stigmatize Pregnant and Parenting Teens

One main message of AOUM states that “bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child’s parents, and society.”

These messages fail to acknowledge that some students will already be pregnant or parenting a child by the time they receive this information. According to a 2014 summary report of U.S. teen pregnancy, birth, and abortion data, roughly 25,000 women under the age of 20 became pregnant in 2010. Of these teen pregnancies, 11,000 were among girls age 14 and younger. The vast majority of these pregnancies occurred outside of marriage.

According to the U.S. Office of Adolescent Health, nearly one in six 15–19 year olds who gave birth in 2013 already had one or more children. This indicates that already pregnant and parenting students are also in need of realistic sex education programs.

Telling these students that they have caused irrevocable harm to themselves, their children, and society is *not* the answer. These young people would be better served by programs that acknowledge the potential challenges of young parenthood, do not stigmatize young parents and, most importantly, provide support to these young people and their families. ■



IV.

Framing Sex Education

When discussing sex education, many people refer to two distinct schools of thought: comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs. In reality, however, most schools in the U.S. teach programs that fall somewhere in between, and these programs are often called a variety of different names.



PHOTO BY
SHINGI RICE

The following terms and definitions provide a basic understanding of the types of sex education programs that are currently offered in schools and communities.

Remember, however, that names can be deceiving. It is important to look past labels and find out the specifics of what young people in your community really are, or are not, learning in their sex education programs.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)

School-based sex education programs that start in kindergarten and continue through 12th grade. These programs include age-appropriate, medically accurate information on a broad set of topics related to sexuality including human development, relationships, personal skills, sexual behaviors including abstinence, sexual health, and society and culture. CSE programs provide students with opportunities for learning information, exploring their attitudes and values, and developing skills.

Abstinence-Plus, Abstinence-Based, Abstinence-Focused or Abstinence-Centered

All of these terms refer to programs that emphasize the benefits of abstinence. These programs also typically include information about sexual behavior other than intercourse as well as contraception and disease-prevention methods.

Abstinence-Only

Programs that emphasize abstinence from all sexual behaviors. These programs generally do not include information about contraception or disease-prevention methods.

Abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM)

Programs that emphasize abstinence from all sexual behaviors outside of heterosexual marriage. If contraception or disease-prevention methods are discussed, these programs typically emphasize failure rates. In addition, they often present marriage as the only morally correct context for sexual activity.

Evidence-Based

Evidence-based programs are those that have been evaluated rigorously and are designed to reduce “risk behaviors” such as unintended pregnancy and HIV and other STIs.

Evidence-Informed

Evidence-informed programs have not yet undergone rigorous scientific evaluation but include content, instruction, and activities based on evidence from other research, programs, or best practices.

Harm or Risk Reduction

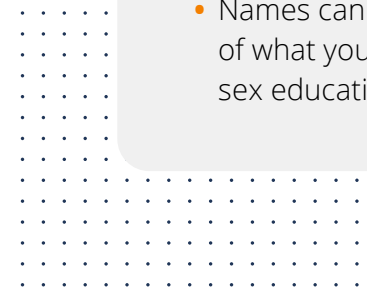
Harm reduction programs are interventions designed to reduce “sexual risk behaviors” among young people by emphasizing the risks associated with sexual behavior. These programs’ primary goals are to reduce unintended pregnancy, HIV, and other STIs.

Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA)

This is another name for AOUM programs. Despite the new name, these are the same programs that focus solely on abstinence and purposefully deprive students of the information and education they need to lead healthy lives. These programs disproportionately impact the most vulnerable populations including: young people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and survivors of sexual assault. ■

Key Points:

- Sex education is a human right.
- Sex education that is comprehensive includes abstinence.
- The majority of individuals in the U.S. do not support current policies that favor AOUM programs and funding.
- Names can be deceiving. It is important to look past labels and find out the specifics of what young people in your community really are, or are not, learning in their sex education programs.

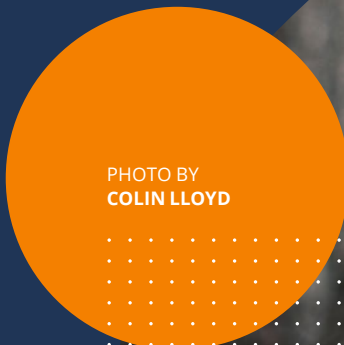


V.

Sex Education Policy: Who Makes Decisions?

Before organizing efforts to advance sex education policy, you may need to familiarize yourself with the existing policy landscape. This section will introduce you to how sex education policy decisions are made across the country and give you insight into who is making them. It will also look at debates that educators and advocates have faced over the years in an effort to help you prepare for, and hopefully prevent, controversy. Finally, this section will help you anticipate some of the arguments you may hear from opponents and offers talking points to effectively express the need to support comprehensive sexuality education.

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COLIN LLOYD



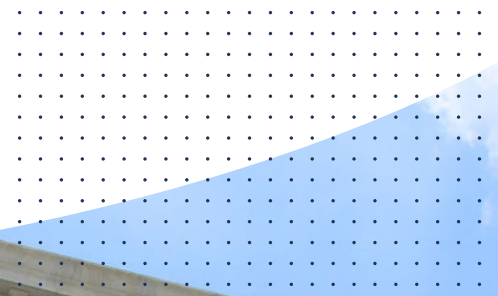
At the Federal Level

For the most part, the federal government does not have a direct role in local sex education.

Instead it leaves such control to state and local bodies. However, because the federal government does control funding for many educational programs, it can influence programs in local schools and communities.

For example, the federal government currently provides funding for [the Personal Responsibility Education Program \(PREP\)](#) and [the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program \(TPPP\)](#), two programs that rely heavily on evidence-based interventions (EBIs). While these are not strictly sex education resources, they can support sex education. In addition, the federal government currently spends \$100 million funding abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs each year.

Although the federal government cannot require or control the content of sex education that is not supported by federal funds, many states and communities view the availability of federal money as a stamp of approval for EBIs and AOUM approaches. In addition, the recent support for EBIs and over three decades of investment in AOUM programs have drastically increased the number of EBI and AOUM curricula and materials that are available for schools and community-based programs. In this way, the federal government has been very influential in affecting how sex education is delivered at the local level. It is worth noting that there is currently no federal funding stream, nor has there ever been federal funding, dedicated to supporting sex education that is comprehensive.



At the State Level

States are much more directly involved in decisions about sex education than the federal government.

States can mandate that sex education be taught, require schools to teach about HIV and other STIs, set statewide guidelines for topics, choose curricula, and approve textbooks. These decisions are made by a variety of agencies and elected officials whose titles and responsibilities differ by state. You can contact your state's education agencies or your elected officials to find out more.

Some states set rules about the content of sex education or STI/HIV prevention courses. Whether or not a course mandate is in place, states can dictate content for those programs that schools choose to teach. For example, a number of states require all courses to "stress abstinence."

The State Legislature

The State Legislature can enact a mandate for sex education or STI/HIV prevention courses. However, less than half of all states require that some form of sex education be taught in the schools. Instead, most states allow local school districts to decide whether to provide this type of education. To find out if your state has course or content mandates, view the [SIECUS State Profiles](#) and the [State Laws and Policies Across the United States](#) chart.

Departments of Education and State Boards of Education

All states have one or more governing bodies that oversee schools and education policy. These agencies and boards vary by state in terms of authority and title. They may have several responsibilities, such as designing curricula, approving materials, and setting outcome objectives for courses. These bodies can also set policies that specifically dictate the type of sex education schools are allowed to provide.



At the Local Level

The majority of decisions about education policy are made at the local level.

Whether or not a state course or content mandate is in place, local administrators may establish their own mandates. These local mandates may expand upon but cannot violate state mandates. If a state mandates that schools provide information on contraception and STI prevention, for example, a local community cannot choose to implement an AOUM program that does not contain this information as its sole curriculum. In contrast, if a state prohibits schools from providing information on contraception in favor of a strict AOUM message, schools cannot choose to include that information in their programs. It is important for local communities to review state requirements carefully. Some states provide leeway for local decisions, even within a mandate.

The School Board

In almost all communities, the school board is involved in decisions about sex education. Among other things, the school board sets district policy and approves curricula, textbooks, pamphlets, and videos. Typically, school board members are elected, so it is important to pay close attention to local elections. While some school board members have strong backgrounds in education, others are often concerned community members with little experience in education and school administration.

The School Health Advisory Committee

Many districts have created special advisory committees to review the materials used in school health and sex education courses. Most often these committees make recommendations to the school board which can either be accepted or rejected. The committee members are usually appointees or volunteers. Teachers, clergy, public health officials, parents, and students may serve on such advisory committees.

The Superintendent, Principal, District Curriculum Coordinator, and Staff

Although they do not set district policy, superintendents, principals, and other school administrators have some control over the content and methods used in their schools and classrooms. In the end, they are responsible for how sex education policies are enforced.

Teachers

Teachers remain the only people within this hierarchy who have daily direct contact with students, and, as such, they are highly influential in decisions about curriculum, materials, activities, and classroom discussions. ■

Helpful Resources:

- [State School Policy Database](#)
- [National School Board Association](#)

VI.

Organizing in Your Community

One thing is certain—you can't go it alone. To effectively advocate for sex education that is comprehensive, you will need to build a broad network of community support. A diverse group of dedicated people working together can move mountains! The following suggestions can help you in this process.



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DISABLED AND HERE



Do Your Homework

Research sex education. Delve into questions, such as:

- What does the research say?
- Who are the major voices in the debate?
- What resources are available?
- What organizations support sex education?
- What organizations oppose sex education and why?
- What are these opponents' strategies at the local, state, and/or national level?

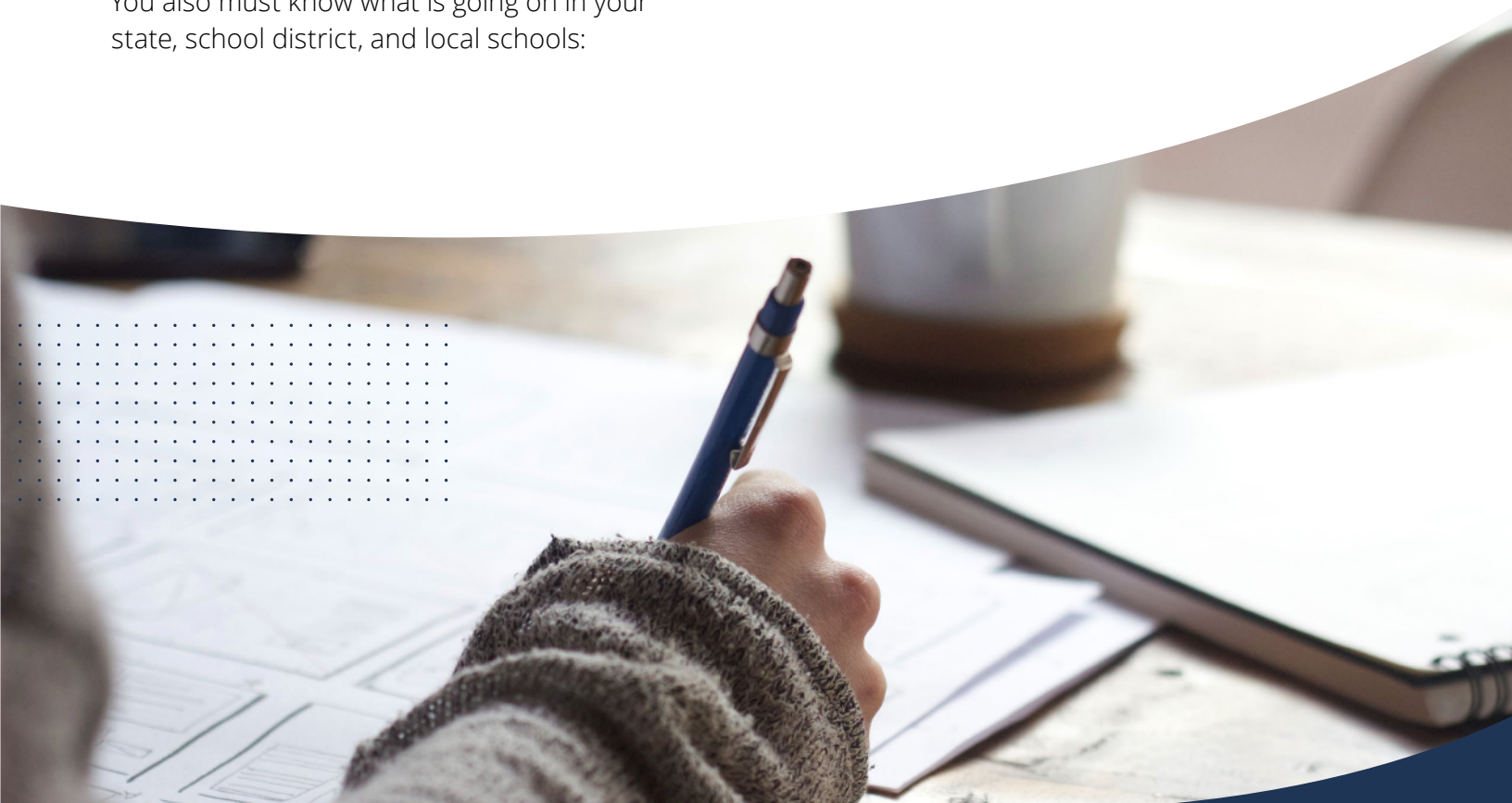
Knowing this information will help you develop a strategy for moving forward and establishing yourself as a credible source for sex education information.

If you are reading this *Community Action Toolkit*, chances are you are already doing a great job on your homework. Congratulations!

You also must know what is going on in your state, school district, and local schools:

- Is there a state mandate for sex education?
- Does the state have education standards in place that include sexuality content (typically, but not always, within health education)?
- Is there a district mandate or policy in place?
- Does the school provide a course in sex education? If so, what is covered? If not, why not?
- Are there local organizations that provide sex education in the community or serve as guest speakers in schools?

Connect with the teachers in your local schools, especially those who are teaching health and/or sex education and science courses. Find out exactly what is taught in the classroom and encourage teachers who are supportive of sex education to start speaking out about it. They often know a great deal about what students need from a sex education course.



Involve a Diverse Group of Community Members

Try to involve a diverse group in your advocacy efforts.

Parents are a particularly effective constituency when working with local school boards since they have a vested interest in their children's education. There may also be other adults who do not have children in school but are concerned with the health and well-being of their community's young people, such as health care providers, business owners, clergy and other faith leaders, and social service providers.

Contact elected officials. Locate those who are supportive of sex education and involve them in your organizing efforts. Encourage them to discuss these issues with their constituents as well as other officials.

Seek out school nurses and community health care providers who are actively involved in providing health education and services. Those who are on the front lines of adolescent sexual health have the best understanding of what young people need.

Include students and local youth in your advocacy efforts. Young people can uniquely speak to the reality and needs of their peers and themselves. They can also organize support for sex education among their student government or general student body.

Once you have involved interested individuals, consider creating a formal group or coalition. Depending on your capacity, consider taking steps to increase your group's visibility through creating a name, a logo, a website, social media accounts, and/or in-person events.

Involve Local Organizations

Find out which local organizations are working with youth or have a strong interest in this issue. Contact them to determine what services they can offer your group and/or if anyone on staff is willing to join your efforts. Some ideas for groups to solicit are:

- 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
- HIV/AIDS organizations
- Health care providers
- Faith-based organizations

Involve Faith Organizations

Reaching out to local faith organizations is very important. Although some groups that oppose sex education often claim to do so on behalf of religious parents and/or organizations, the truth is that many faith organizations are very supportive of sex education. Including representatives of various faith organizations in your advocacy group can strengthen your efforts. Religious communities are already organized and may offer access to a variety of resources, such as meeting space(s), volunteer networks, funding, and public relations opportunities.

Start with the interfaith alliance in your community (if one exists) or the statewide “conference of churches” rather than approaching congregations individually. This will allow you access to more people in less time. The [Religious Institute](#) may also be a helpful resource on issues of sex education and faith.

Involve National Organizations

National organizations can aid with strategy, resource materials, and referrals. They may also put you in touch with other local allies and affiliates.

Examples of national organizations include:

- SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change
- Planned Parenthood Federation of America
- Advocates for Youth
- Answer
- Human Rights Campaign
- Guttmacher Institute
- Healthy Teen Network
- Power to Decide
- In Our Own Voice: National Black Women’s Reproductive Justice Agenda
- National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
- National Asian Pacific American
- Women’s Forum
- National LGBTQ Taskforce
- School Based Health Alliance
- GLSEN



Working with School Boards

Most decisions about sex education are made at the local level.

As a result, you will likely spend most of your time as an advocate working with your local school board members.

Get to Know the School Board

Contact each school board member personally. Determine each board member's educational priorities and their support for sex education.

- Be prepared to use different approaches when reaching out. Some board members may be most responsive to email, others will respond more readily to phone calls, and still others may be best reached through "snail mail" addressed to their attention at the school district office.
- Sometimes, it may be most effective simply to attend a routine school board meeting and make an in-person introduction to individual members before or after the meeting. You do not need to raise the topic of sex education immediately. You can use this one-to-one greeting as an opportunity to schedule a follow-up meeting at which you can discuss sex education.

As you learn each board member's stance on sex education, publicize what you find.

- When publicizing the views of a school board member, be prepared to do so through ALL available channels. Keep in mind that while you may be an avid user of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, some of the most influential citizens in your community may

not use social media. Local community newspapers and community radio still have enormous potential to inform those most likely to vote in school board elections. Be sure to get your message out through traditional media as well as digital media.

- A respectful and informative tone works best when publicizing school board members' positions on sex education. Social media invites comments from community members (and outsiders) that may become accusatory and overly personal in tone. Monitor such activity if you use social media, and actively reinforce a respectful tone that shows your support for sex education is based on facts, not just feelings.

Discussing Sex Education with a School Board Member

Provide each school board member with research and relevant literature. Help them become as informed as you are.

- Tailor the information to each board member's key concerns.
 - For example, if you learn that one school board member is most concerned about parent reaction, provide them with information showing most parents support sex education that is comprehensive.
- Schedule these one-on-one meetings well before the school board needs to make policy decisions. Your early outreach will let them know that you are a reliable source of information and make them more likely to turn to you when a situation arises.

 **TIP:**

Have members of your advocacy group take turns attending meetings. Make sure someone is present at all school board meetings. These meetings are often sparsely attended so the presence of even a few people can have a strong impact. Regular attendance prior to any controversy or decision about sex education can increase your credibility with the board members.

- Testify at school board meetings. Coordinate your testimony with other people so that your three or four key messages are reiterated.
- Encourage a wide range of community members to contact the school board. Even a few calls, letters, or emails can make a big difference in the outcome of a debate about sex education.

Be an Active Citizen during School Board Elections

Remember that, while school board members may be appointed, most are elected. School board elections typically have low voter turnout, meaning that you can make a big difference in the quality of sex education in your community by urging the people you know to vote for candidates who are supportive.

- Organize a voter registration drive and urge people to vote for candidates who support a comprehensive approach to sex education.
- Encourage members of your advocacy group to run for seats on the school board. Or, consider running for the school board yourself!

Charter Schools are Different

If you are trying to influence a public charter school, you may discover that sex education policies are determined by a separate governing board. Depending on your state, it may be a charter-specific board or even the State Board of Education. If your state is one of the over 40 U.S. states that authorize charter schools, be sure to confirm whether a local or state board is the appropriate policy-making body to approach.



Working with Policymakers

The majority of decisions about sex education are made at the local level, so it's best to focus on working with school board members and school district staff. However, federal and state policymakers are integral in shaping requirements and limitations on sex education both through legislation and subsequent regulation and guidance.

Therefore, educating legislators is essential for advancing sex education. Fortunately, there are multiple ways to communicate with your state and federal policymakers. The most common and easiest way is to send them a constituent email.

In-person meetings with legislators and/or their staff can also create effective education and advocacy opportunities. Here are some tips to help you make the most of your time.

Be Prepared

When conducting a visit to your legislator's office, they will likely have limited time to meet with you.

- Prepare a clear and concise message beforehand.
- Be able to back up your position with facts and personal anecdotes.
- Research their position on the issues and know your allies and opponents.
- If you are visiting their office with a group, decide each person's role ahead of time. It is helpful to identify a group leader who will kick off the visit and state the goals of the meeting.

Remain Flexible

Arrive at the office at least 10 minutes before the meeting is scheduled to begin. Although meeting directly with the legislator is ideal, more often than not a staff person will stand in for them. Do not feel slighted if this occurs—this is common and meeting with staff is very important. These individuals have the ear of the legislator and serve as trusted resources for legislative decisions.

Bring a Constituent

If you need to meet with a legislator who does not represent your district, find a constituent to bring along. If it is feasible, allow this person to lead the meeting. Policymakers are always more interested in what a voter in their district has to say. It is also helpful if this person can provide a story or anecdote explaining why the elected official should support a certain policy. Always try to demonstrate the connection between your request and the interests of the legislator's constituency.

Stay Focused

Start by identifying yourself. A good way to begin the meeting is to express appreciation for past actions in favor of your issue. Stay focused and try to keep the conversation centered on your issue at all times. Never argue with the legislator, the legislative staff, or members of your advocacy group.

Be Direct

Know your goal or “ask” before the meeting—what would you like the legislator to learn or do as a result of the meeting? You may want to bring a menu of ways they can support your cause, depending on where they stand on the issue. Try to secure tangible commitments such as sponsoring a relevant piece of legislation or moving a bill forward.

Be Honest

If you do not know the answer to a question, indicate that you do not have the information but will provide it to them as soon as possible. Be sure to follow up with any information that was requested. Following up is as important as the meeting itself and serves as an excellent opportunity to establish trust and continue building a relationship with the office.

Be a Resource

Thank the legislator or staff person for their time. Repeat your topline goal or your “ask” as appropriate. Leave them with a fact sheet or other materials that concisely summarizes your main points. Include your contact information and establish yourself as a future resource. Offer your business card (if you have one) and request a business card of any staff member with whom you have met.

Send a Thank-You Note

After your meeting, send a brief thank you note to the legislator and staff members you met. This is an opportunity to reiterate your key points and include any follow-up information and/or materials. It is perfectly acceptable to do this via email. ■



Key Points:

- Familiarize yourself with the existing policy landscape.
- To find out if your state has course or content mandates, view the [SIECUS State Profiles](#).
- Identify allies and engage diverse members.
- Remember that the majority of sex education decisions are made at the local level.
- Be prepared, honest, and flexible when meeting with policymakers.



VII.

Youth Advocacy

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 part of the 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.



PHOTO BY
JOEL MUNIZ

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.

Strategies to gauge support from fellow students:

- 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?

- 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 on [page 33](#).

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 the [Digital Advocacy](#) section of this Toolkit for more 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.

More tips about writing an op ed can be found on [page 58](#).



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.

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



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:

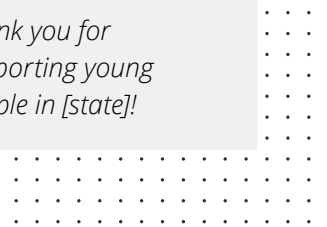
- Prepare your ask beforehand. It may be helpful to rehearse stating why the issue is important to you and making your ask in front of an audience before your meeting.
- Have facts and anecdotes to back up your position.
- Research your opposition so you can anticipate proposed counterarguments and address 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.

TIPS:

- Say everything in the body of the email—don't include attachments.
- 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 obviously 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 students 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

*Co-Founder and Core Team Leader
VACSER*



VIII.

Parental Engagement

Parents and guardians are in a great position to receive candid feedback about sex education curriculums from their children and advocate for improvements on their behalf. While students are capable of and encouraged to participate in self-advocacy, parents wield a great deal of influence over school matters given their abilities to both engage in committees and vote. We know that the majority of parents support sex education, and it's important to make your support known.

In this toolkit we provide a few ideas for how to get involved if you are concerned about your child's sex education curriculum and want to advocate for advancing sex education in your district and state.



PHOTO BY
NATHAN DUMLAO

Do Your Research

Many districts require that sex education curriculums are posted online or shared with parents before the information is taught.

If this is not the case for your district, you should still be able to access the curriculum by contacting your child's school.

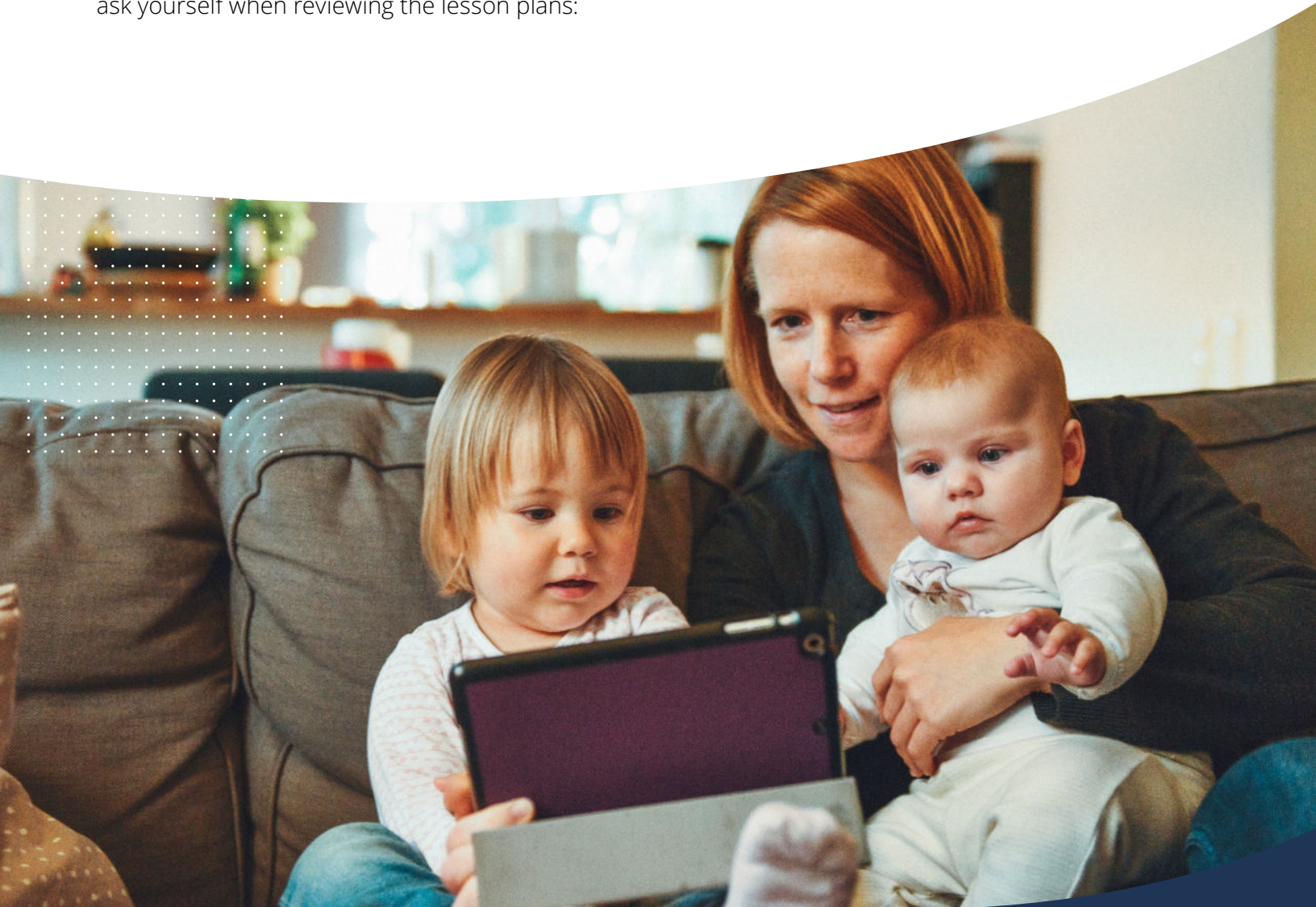
You may already have an existing concern that you want to review in greater detail, or just a general interest in learning about what is being taught in school. Here are some questions to ask yourself when reviewing the lesson plans:

- Is the information taught to students required to be medically accurate and age-appropriate?
- Does the curriculum perpetuate stigma against students?
- Is the curriculum inclusive of LGBTQ+ identities?



TIP:

For more information, visit the [National Sex Education Standards](#).



Organize

You do not necessarily need to be a member of a formal committee or advisory board in order to advocate for change in your school district or state.

There are many options for organizing that do not require direct association with your school or county. Here are a couple ideas to get you started:

Take Advantage of Social Media

Social media can be a great way to organize fellow parents that share your concerns and want to make a change. Potential uses for social media include:

- Surveying parents in the district about their opinions on the sex education curriculum.
- Organizing groups to attend school board meetings and other events.
- Raising awareness for issues within the school's sex education curriculum.

Refer to [page 61](#) for further guidance on using social media to advocate for advancing sex education.

Partner with Local Organizations

There are plenty of local organizations that would be more than happy to help you advocate for advancing sex education in your area. Consider reaching out to them.

Examples of local organizations include:

- Parent Teacher Association/Organization
- Teacher's union
- Family planning clinics
- HIV/AIDS organizations
- Health care providers
- Reproductive health care advocacy organizations
- Faith-based organizations
- LGBTQ+ organizations



Join School Organizations

If you do have the time and the opportunity, joining school or county organizations can be a great way to ensure your concerns reach decision makers.

Parent Teacher Association/Organization

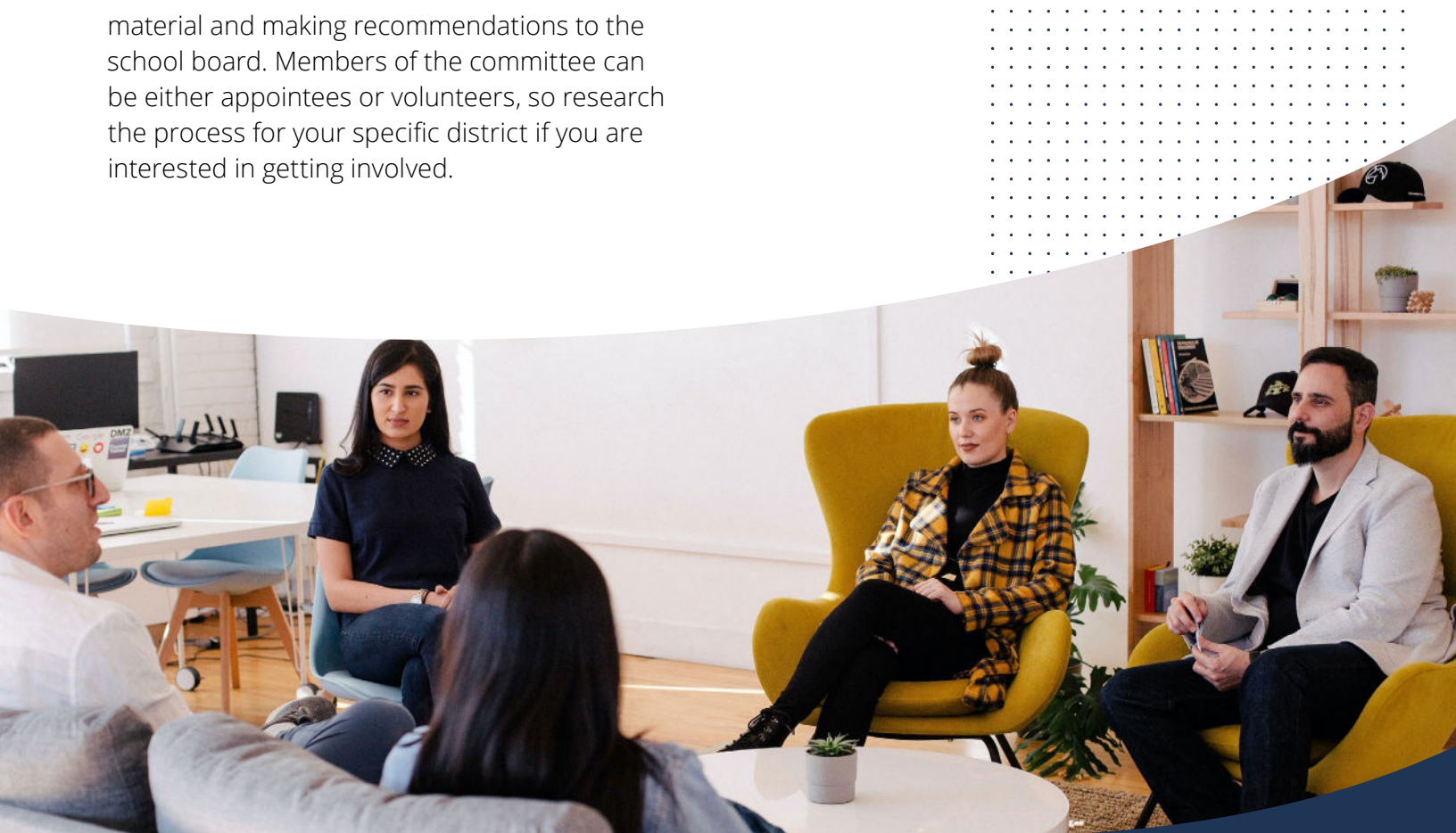
The Parent Teacher Association and Parent Teacher Organizations provide opportunities for parents to get involved and work with school staff to improve educational experiences for students. Reach out to your child's school for more information on joining.

Advisory Committees

There is a good chance your district and/or school has a School Health Advisory Committee and/or a Curriculum Advisory Committee. These committees are typically tasked with reviewing health education and sex education curriculum material and making recommendations to the school board. Members of the committee can be either appointees or volunteers, so research the process for your specific district if you are interested in getting involved.

Testimonies

Consider testifying at school board meetings or other public hearings that allow community members to voice their concerns. This is a great opportunity to present your concern to an audience and propose a solution. It can be even more effective to collaborate with other parents beforehand to speak on the same issue and emphasize a need for change. There are also numerous opportunities for parents to provide public comment on education standards. Check in with your state Department of Education to understand local processes and timelines.



Contact Elected Officials

Familiarize yourself with the process of designing or selecting sex education curriculums in your state or district—who ultimately makes the decision around policies that concern you?

It could be your legislature, the State Board of Education, or your local school board. Knowing the answer to this question will allow you to determine the most effective approach to advocating for change. Refer to [page 17](#) to learn more about these organizations.

Once you know who the decision makers are, here is some guidance for how to go about reaching out to them with your concerns:

Emailing Representatives

When constructing an email to your representative:

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.

Calling Representatives

You, or your representative, may prefer phone calls over emails. When calling a representative, consider the following guidelines:

1. Share your name and make it clear you are a constituent (you live in their district).
2. Share your specific sex education concern. Keep this clear and concise. Utilizing values based messaging or sharing relatable and personable examples will make the conversation more memorable and personal to your representative.
3. Tell the elected official exactly what you would like them to do about the specific sex education issue (“Please vote ‘Yes’/‘No’ on X policy change”)
4. Thank the elected official for supporting your cause.

In-Person Meetings with Representatives

There is a chance that your representative’s preferred method of contact is in-person meetings. If this is the case, keep these tips in mind:

1. Prepare your persuasive message beforehand. You will want to be very direct in the point you are trying to make.
2. Gather facts and anecdotes that support your position or concern.
3. Conduct background research on your opposition so you can anticipate counter-arguments and address them.

The best way to persuade those who are skeptical of your demands is to affirm shared values. One tactic you can use to find common ground is *agree, bridge, and convince*.

- Start with stating something you can *agree* on. (“We all want...” or “You’re right that...”)
- Create a *bridge* to shift the conversation toward your messaging. (“However, ...” or “The thing to remember is ...”)
- Then, you’ll be better set up to *convince* them of your message.

The key points that you choose to prioritize may vary depending on your audience. For example, if speaking to the school board you may choose to highlight the financial benefit of pursuing your desired change, while for parents you may decide to highlight the positive outcomes it can have on their children’s well-being.



Vote

Being an active voter is a highly effective way to influence sex education policies and curriculums in your area.

Representatives of your state are elected, as are most school board members. Do your research on candidates and vote for those who have historically supported policies that advance sex education.

To learn more about your state's procedures and candidates' voting histories, you may utilize resources such as [Ballotpedia](#).



Communicate with Your Child

Remember that your child is the one receiving the sex education curriculum first-hand.

Therefore, they will likely be able to offer the best insight into the content and how it may be impacting their life experiences.

Use policies as opportunities to start conversations.

Many districts require that schools notify parents, or even require parent's written permission, when their child is beginning their sex education course or when specific content is due to be taught. Use these opportunities to open conversations with your child about their sex education curriculum or other related topics. ■



IX.

Messaging for Sex Education Policy

Whether you are speaking at a school board meeting, talking to a reporter on the phone, or drafting a letter-to-the-editor (LTE), it's important to have clear, concise messages. Crafting these messages and using them throughout your policy efforts can be a challenge. This section will help you develop materials that you can use when discussing the issue with other concerned community members as well as with school administrators, school board members, elected officials, and the media. It will also give you tips for getting the message out through press releases, LTEs, opinion editorials (op eds), social media, and correspondence with policymakers.



PHOTO BY
VLADA KARPOVICH

Speaking in Public

As you work to advance sex education, you will most likely have to speak in front of a group.

The following suggestions will help you make an effective presentation.

Develop a Few Key Messages

Determine the most important messages you want to communicate. The biggest mistake many people make is thinking that they have to say everything. Keep your messages short and limit your remarks to approximately three or four key points—this will help ensure that you consistently communicate your strongest, most effective messages.

Remind your audience that this is about what benefits ALL young people. Opponents will likely counter that you are representing only a small, elite special-interest group. Be ready to emphasize from the start that:

- ALL young people deserve good health and support to remain in school and graduate.
- ALL young people deserve medically accurate sex education.
- Sex education must be inclusive of ALL young people—regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, disability status, family situation, or past or current sexual experiences.
- ALL parents deserve assurance that schools in their community are committed to providing factual, high quality information to keep their children safe and healthy—and that includes sex education.

Repeat, repeat, repeat. Take every opportunity to restate your key messages. If you are engaged in a public debate, use each question as an opportunity to communicate your key messages. Remember that you do not need to directly answer a question posed to you. If you do, try to end your answer with one of your key points. *Always restate one of your key messages when asked if you have anything else to add.*

Define Your Role

Determine what your position is at each meeting.

- Are you there as a public health expert to discuss studies and data?
- Are you there as an education expert to discuss student retention and academic achievement?

If so, rely on professional resources and research, and use personal references and emotional pleas sparingly. *(But don't avoid them altogether, especially in a community meeting.)*

- Or, are you speaking as a parent, teacher, or school nurse?

If so, emphasize your concern for young people and use personal stories and community statistics to make your points. Use technical jargon sparingly.

Get to Know Your Audience

Depending on your audience, your presentation content and style will vary. If you are addressing a group of parents, your messages should be different compared to addressing the press. Determine the most persuasive messages for each audience. For example, you might choose to emphasize the financial costs of instituting an ineffective abstinence-only-until-marriage program when talking to a school board or superintendent.

When talking to the media it is best to emphasize scientific facts. For example, you might explain that evidence suggests comprehensive sexuality education programs work while there is no evidence that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs work at all.

Remember to consider the messages you want to relay as well as those you want to avoid for each group you address.

Affirm Shared Values

People are more inclined to receive your message positively if you can first calm their fears and affirm your shared values. While this is often easier said than done, there are some tactics you can use to find common ground: *Agree, bridge, and convince*.

- Start with stating something you can *agree* on. (“We all want...” or “You’re right that...”)
- Create a *bridge* to shift the conversation toward your messaging. (“However, ...” or “The thing to remember is ...”)
- Then, you’ll be better set up to *convince* them of your message.

EXAMPLE:

If someone opposing sex education in schools says, “Parents should be the ones talking to their children about sex. This has no business being taught in school.”

You could respond with, “**You’re absolutely right** that parents should talk to their children about their values and beliefs when it comes to sex. **And I completely agree:** parents can and should play a central role in how young people view sex and sexuality. **The thing to remember is** that too many young people aren’t getting any sex education at all—from their parents, from their teachers, or elsewhere. When we have sex education at school, we can ensure that the young people in our community are getting the trusted, age-appropriate, accurate information they need to stay safe and healthy. We owe that to our young people—and to their parents.”



Practice Makes Perfect

Practice stating your key messages until they become second nature. If you are making a presentation, rehearse several times in front of family, friends, or a mirror, until you feel comfortable. Also, be sure to time yourself and keep within any designated time limit. If you go over your time, it is likely that you will be asked to stop and may miss the opportunity to make some important points. Don't get frustrated if your first few practice runs are less than perfect. Keep trying and you will improve.

Look at social media for examples of short messages with high impact. Facebook, Twitter, and other social media channels often display messages about sex education (from supporters as well as opponents) that are short and to the point. Try using some of these as talking points by practicing how you would say them aloud to another person or a group.

Anticipate Questions

Inviting questions after a presentation gives you an opportunity to clarify your remarks and reiterate your key points. Answering unexpected questions, however, can be challenging, and it is easy to be thrown off. It helps if you view each question as an opportunity to state your case, remember to keep your answers short, and stick to your messages. It is also helpful to prepare responses to likely arguments or questions so that you can avoid getting caught off-guard. If you are "stumped" by a question you can't answer, state firmly that you will find the answer and make sure to report the answer back to the group.

Make It Personal

While statistics and research are powerful tools, local examples or personal stories will ensure that your messages truly stick. For example, in one community, advocates for comprehensive sexuality education illustrated a statistic by stating that each year more young women in their community give birth than graduate from high school. This compelling fact was easy for people to understand and remember. Sharing stories and examples from family, friends, and community members will also illustrate your message on a more personal level (although you will likely want to keep the story anonymous or use pseudonyms to protect privacy).

Be Confident

Speak with conviction! If your opponent claims that comprehensive sexuality education encourages young people to become sexually active, don't say, "***I think*** there are studies that show the opposite." Say, "***Scientific studies clearly show*** that sex education does not hasten the onset of intercourse. ***In fact, it has been found to delay sexual activity among teens.***"

"*I think*" and "*I feel*" statements will come across weaker than definitive statements when you are speaking as an expert. If you are speaking as a parent or concerned adult who is sharing personal stories, "*I think*" and "*I feel*" statements are more appropriate.

Speak clearly, slowly, and loudly. The more practice you have communicating your points, the less likely you are to get tripped up with “ums” and “uhs.”

Use body language that communicates confidence and conviction. Stand up straight and use emphatic gestures. Avoid reading directly from your paper—this often leads to a monotone presentation that does not connect with the audience. It is not necessary to memorize your remarks. Instead, be familiar enough with them that you can glance at your paper periodically and use it as a guide. When you are not looking at your paper, you should maintain eye contact with audience members to keep their attention focused on you.



TIP:

If eye contact is uncomfortable for you, try looking at the tops of people’s heads. This gives the impression that you are looking straight at the audience.

Stay Focused on Your Key Messages

When speaking, stick to your main points. Avoid going off on tangents or letting your opponents steer the conversation to unrelated or less important issues. You can maintain (or regain) control of a discussion or debate by returning to your key messages.

Focus on the issues rather than on the personalities or affiliations of the people involved in the discussion. Acknowledge that everyone involved wants what is best for the young people in the community.

Keep Cool, Calm, and Collected

Make conscious decisions about how to present yourself. This includes what you wear, how you assert yourself, who you sit beside at the meeting, and how you act during other people’s presentations. You want your audience to like your message, but it helps if they like you as well.

Always maintain a professional demeanor. Sex education can be a highly charged issue and many people have passionate feelings about it. A rational presentation with strong messages, backed up with facts, is the most effective.

Get a Little Help from Your Friends

Ask family, friends, co-workers, and supporters to attend meetings or call in to radio or television shows where you are speaking. A friendly face or voice can make all the difference. Prompt them to ask questions that will allow you to get your main messages across.

If you are testifying at a meeting, coordinate with any colleagues who are also speaking so that you can support, rather than simply reiterate, or worse—contradict, each other in your testimony.



Working with Traditional Media

Involving the media is a great way to get your message out, reach concerned community members not yet involved, and influence key policymakers.

The following suggestions will help you in dealing with reporters and others in the media.

Know Your Media Outlet

Most traditional news media—newspaper, radio, and television—are geographically oriented. Some are strictly local and are only interested in a particular town or area. Other media outlets are statewide, national, or international in scope. Know who you are talking to and focus your discussion accordingly. For example, an excellent way to get a national story (like one on federal abstinence-only-until-marriage funding) into a regional or local paper is to pitch a story on how the federal policy impacts your local community.

TIPS:

- Read your local news regularly.
- Keep articles of interest to you and file them in a folder either in hard copy or electronic form.
- Take note of any reporters that tend to write about sex education.

Create a Media List and Update it Regularly

Research and create a list of reporters in your area who cover local school board or health issues and how to contact them. Search online for listings of newspaper, radio, and television media outlets. Contact the assignment desk and ask which reporter covers schools or health issues. You can also contact organizations that you know support sex education. They may have media lists that they will share with you. Remember to update your list regularly as you learn information about what types of stories each reporter covers and how they prefer to be contacted.

TIPS:

- Don't underestimate smaller outlets: podcasts, blogs, newsletters, community bulletins, flyers, etc. are also great ways of getting your message out.
- Because reporters often write for multiple outlets, Twitter and Facebook are great tools to follow and keep in touch with reporters who write about sex education issues.
- When a reporter writes a good story on your issue, let them know you appreciate the coverage by sharing the story on social media and sending a thank you email.

Give Them the Facts

Facts speak for themselves. Always be prepared with three or four basic messages to support your argument. Back up the messages with facts. For example, if your state participates in the [Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)](#) conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), you might want to tell a reporter what percentage of high school seniors in your state have already had sexual intercourse. Or, check your health department's statistics on rates of STIs among young people.

TIPS:

- Have current information and statistics at your fingertips.
- **Never lie to reporters.** You will get caught.

Maintain the High Ground

Reporters need stories and are particularly interested in those that involve controversy and debate. They will always try to pit one side against the other, especially regarding sensitive social issues. Do not feel intimidated. Stick to your main messages and back them up with the facts. Never criticize the media or the groups on the other side of your issue.

TIP:

- Ask who else has been interviewed for a story. Doing so will give you an idea of who else is involved in your issue and what angle the reporter is taking.

Provide Local Stories

Many reporters also seek out stories from a human interest perspective. It is important to have local stories to feed reporters.

TIP:

- If you're telling the story of a local individual or agency, be sure to get their permission in advance or offer to change names to protect their privacy.



Writing a Press Release

A press release is a tool used to alert the media.

You can use a press release to state a position, launch a campaign, respond to a recent political decision, or comment on a new body of research. Send the press release out to everyone on your press list.

TIPS:

- “Pithy” quotes—ones that are substantive, but also cleverly or memorably phrased—often get the most attention. Spend time thinking about and crafting your quotations. The better they are, the more likely they will appear verbatim in the story.
- Always copy and paste your press release into the body of an email.

Write a Press Advisory

A press advisory is a specific kind of press release that announces an event (such as a community forum on sex education). These should place the emphasis on the time and location of the event.

TIPS:

- Send advisories 2 or 3 days before the scheduled date.
- Do not put quotations or extensive details in a press advisory because it will deter reporters from attending the event. Include just enough detail to “hook” them.

Keep in Touch

It helps to develop personal relationships with reporters and keeping in touch is an important part of this. Contact a reporter to remind them of a press event, send an email to reporters who didn’t attend telling them how it went, or thank a reporter for writing a good or balanced story on your issue.

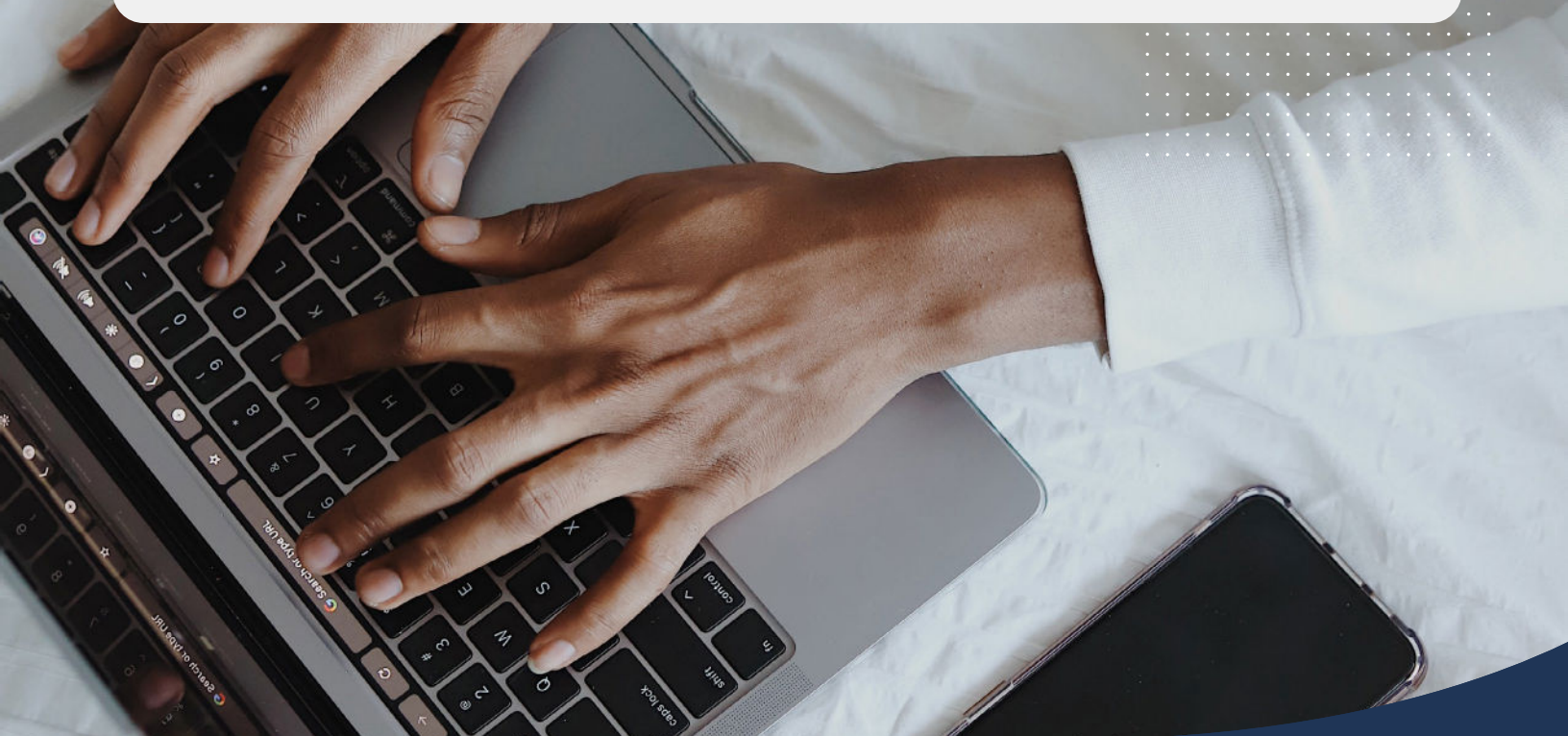
TIPS:

- The best time to contact a reporter is between 10am and 3pm—before they begin to push up against the day’s deadline, but after the first cup of coffee.
- In general, reporters greatly prefer email to phone calls. Call them only as a last resort.
- In the subject lines of your emails to reporters, do not put phrases like “Thought you would think this is interesting” or “Great Story!” Reporters will not read these emails. Instead, put a short fact-filled phrase in the subject line that will let the reporter know exactly what the email contains (e.g. Dallas School Board Approves Sex Ed Budget).

How to Write a Press Release

Reporters often get story ideas from the press releases they receive. Below are a few tips to help you get started:

- **Keep It Brief:** The press release should be no more than one page.
- **Write Like a Reporter:** A press release should read like a news story. Start by writing a brief, attention-grabbing headline that suggests your point of view. Below the headline, write the name of your city and state.
- **Be Active:** In the first sentence, make your organization or the coalition you are writing the press release on behalf of an active player. For example, "Parents For Public Health, a coalition of parents and health professionals, commends Representative Smith for supporting legislation that promotes comprehensive sexuality education."
- **Provide Answers:** Don't forget to answer the questions *who, what, when, where, and why* with the most important details at the beginning of the release.
- **Be Quotable:** Highlight your viewpoint and include positive, succinct quotes from a member of your organization or coalition. Your goal is to get reporters to insert these quotes, verbatim, into their stories. Identify the person (and organization) from whom the quote originates. You also want to include poignant facts that support your organization's position as these may also be put into a news story verbatim.
- **Look Like a Professional:** To make your press release look as professional as possible, be sure to include a date, contact name, and phone number at the top of the release. End the release with "###"; this journalistic convention indicates that this is the end of the release.



Writing Opinion Editorials and Letters to the Editor

An **opinion editorial (op ed)** is a short, written piece sent to a newspaper that offers a clear and opinionated view of a current events issue. However, op-eds are not in direct response to something already published.

Letters to the editor (LTEs) are usually written responses to something that has appeared on the op ed page or in a news story. Both LTEs and op eds are an effective ways to reframe or add to the contents of existing media coverage and get your message out to members of your community, including key decision-makers.

Unlike newspaper articles, these letters are printed in your own words and can therefore have a great impact on your advocacy efforts. At the same time, it becomes even more important to craft your messages carefully. The following are a few tips to help you undertake this task.

Monitor the Paper

Monitor your local newspaper's "Letters to the Editor" column. Assess the outlet's balance in news coverage and write if you notice an imbalance, if you want to share a new perspective, or offer an alternate solution. Monitor articles and op-eds about sex education and consider offering your opinion as a follow up.

Have a Reason for Writing

Construct your letters in response to a recent article, editorial, or community event. For example, *"I am writing in response to your article about sex education, ('Anytown Changes Sex Ed Program', September 1, 2018)."* For timeliness reasons

(and to increase chances of publication), most outlets prefer email submissions in which the letter draft is pasted directly into an email and begins with a headline and *"To the Editor:"* or *"Dear Editor:"* Your letter should be submitted as quickly as possible after the publication of the original piece: within one or two days is best.

Explain Where You Fit In

Start by noting your relationship to the issue, such as *"I am the father of a fifth-grader"* or *"I am a health care professional."*

State the Facts

State facts to support your position. Include relevant data when applicable. For example, *"I am concerned about rising teen pregnancy rates in Example County. According to the Department of Health, teen pregnancy rates increased at the staggering rate of XX percent between last year and this year."* Be sure to hyperlink text to re-direct to your sources. This way, editors can click the links to easily verify that what you are saying is, in fact, fact.

Keep it Short

Keep the letter short and to the point. Your letter should not exceed 200 words, but the shorter your submission, the more likely it will be printed in its entirety. If the outlet decides to shorten your letter, editors will usually cut from the final paragraphs—so don't save your point for the end.



Stay Focused

Stick to the issues and do not attack individual reporters. Readers will respect reasoned arguments. Emphasize one or two points in concise, compelling language.

Use the Opportunity

When applicable, take the opportunity to elicit support for your coalition or to encourage community members to attend school board meetings. Give people a way to contact you in case they would like to get involved.

Make the Connections

In some cases, it may help to connect sex education to other pertinent issues for your community. For example, *"A conservative parents' group has started attacking the existing sex education program, at the same time the group has asked that a variety of books be put on restricted access at the local library. Clearly, this group has a broader agenda."*

Close Strong

The last sentence of the letter is as important as the first. Restate your support for sex education in the closing sentence of the letter.

Include Important Information

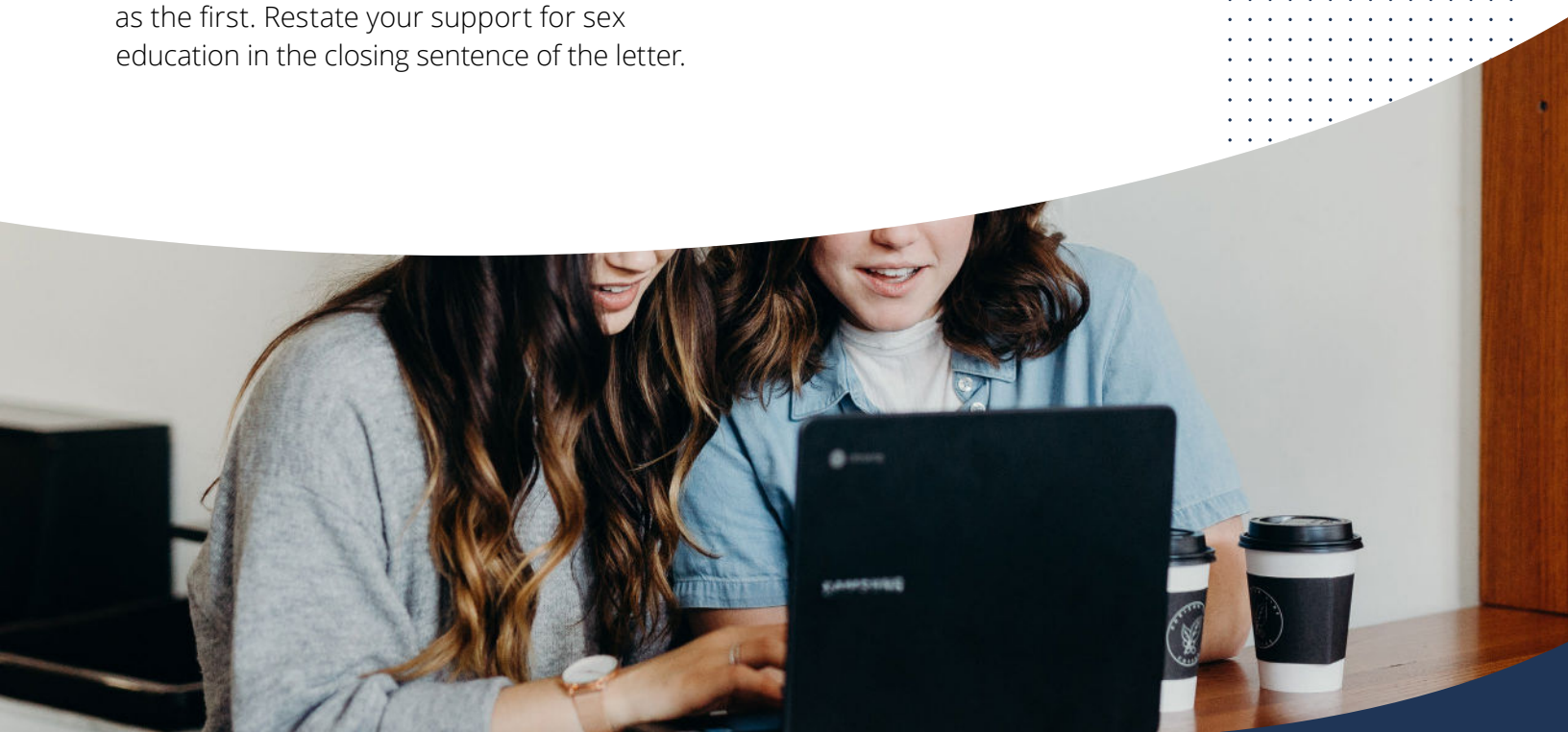
Read the submission guidelines for the outlet. Make sure to include your name, phone number, and the date you submitted the letter. Follow up with a phone call to find out if your letter will run.

Examples of Letters to the Editor:

- [Don't hamper sex education](#)
- [Hill should back standards for sex education](#)
- [Letter to the editor: Senator's sex ed views are outdated](#)

Examples of Op Eds:

- [I'm a sexual consent educator. Here's what's missing in the Aziz Ansari conversation](#)
- [We Must Answer #MeToo with Comprehensive Sexuality Education](#)
- [Stop Missing the Point: Sex Ed Is a Human Right](#)



Writing to Your Policymaker

Writing a letter, either via email, through an online action page, or mailing a hard copy, remains one of the most important tools for communicating with your elected officials on both the national and state level.

Their job is to represent you and your interests, so your opinion is important to them. The following tips and sample letter below can help you undertake this task.

Write or Type

While federal and state elected officials have varied policies when it comes to responding to correspondence from constituents, each letter gets read and tallied. To find the name or email address of your representatives, go to house.gov or senate.gov, or call 202-224-3121.

Federal Addresses

For Senators:

The Honorable _____
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

For Representatives:

The Honorable _____
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Don't forget to check out [SIECUS's website](#) for opportunities to personalize letters on timely federal policy opportunities!

Explain Yourself

Your letter should state that you are a constituent and explain why you are writing. If you are a parent concerned about a particular issue, lead with that. If there is a specific bill you would like your representative to support or oppose, mention it by its bill number (H.R. __ or S. __) in your opening sentence. For federal bills, the website congress.gov can help you find bill numbers. Your state legislature's website should provide similar information.

Get Personal

Include a personal story, if applicable, to help you make your point. Your interests and personal experiences often help elected officials better understand your viewpoint.

Don't copy multiple representatives on the email or send a mass email. Instead, send individual emails directly to targeted representatives.

Stick to the Point

Address only one issue in each letter, as different staff may be responsible for different issues.

Be Polite

Although this goes without saying, it is important to be as polite as possible. You might want to start by thanking the official for their past record on your issue. If you have met your representative or seen them speak, mention that as well. ■

Digital Advocacy

It seems that every day there is a new digital platform for connecting with others.

These platforms introduce ever-evolving methods of sharing our thoughts and experiences and, when utilized properly, can be an extremely effective way of advocating for policy change. Because digital platforms have the potential to reach many people with relatively low effort, they can be a good option if you are trying to produce grassroots support for your cause. Additionally, since many digital platforms are so widely used, it's important that your voice is present among all of the others.

Let's look at some of the different forms of digital advocacy!

Digital Action Alerts

"Digital Action Alerts" are calls to action sent directly to the inboxes of constituents. They can be used most effectively to mobilize fellow advocates to take a specific action to influence a certain policy. Digital action alerts should be concise (about 200–250 words) and they should make it abundantly clear to recipients what it is you want them to do.

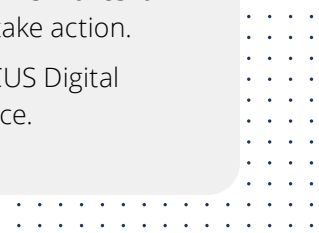
Steps to Follow when Constructing a Digital Action Alert:

1. Include the name of the bill you are advocating for (or against) in the first sentence of the action alert.
2. State your specific call to action (contact a representative, etc.)

3. Follow with a brief explanation of why your issue of focus requires urgent action, including:
 - Consequences (positive or negative) of this bill passing
 - Consequences (positive or negative) of this bill not passing
 - Why the representative should care about this issue
 - Final statement on why you do/don't support this bill
4. Repeat your specific call to action.
5. Thank the reader for their time in advance of taking action.

TIPS:

- Consider working with other organizations when crafting your Digital Action Alert. A coalition with reputable partners will demonstrate a unified message and expand the reach of your call to action.
- Ensure recipients can easily access any forms you want them to fill out after reading your alert. The less the reader is redirected, the more likely it is that they will answer your call to action.
- It is also helpful to include a pre-drafted message for people to use. This makes it extremely easy for them to take action.
- [Here](#) is an example of a SIECUS Digital Action Alert for your reference.





Social Media

Billions of people have social media accounts, and many of them view these accounts every single day. Social media can therefore provide you the opportunity to reach many people very quickly.

Social media can be used for a variety of purposes: to inform on the need for policy change, to call followers to take action for/against a specific policy, to update followers on a meeting with a representative, and much more. Your specific intentions and desired audience might influence the social media platform you choose to utilize.

It's important when using social media to be intentional with the information you share. By positioning yourself as a voice for a cause, you are taking on the responsibility of sharing accurate information that uplifts the voices of those you are advocating for.

Effectively Using Social Media to Advocate for Policy Change:

Social media can serve a variety of purposes for advocates. You may want to use your platform to inform people about events, such as a rally on the Capitol steps, or you may want to direct people to a Digital Action Alert depending on your identified goals. Reflecting on your

(or your organization's) call to action will help you determine how to approach social media and identify what kind of information you want to prioritize.

Activism and advocacy efforts are most often seen on social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

Different social media platforms have different features that, when used effectively, can aid your effort to spread the word or organize with fellow advocates. For example, [hashtags](#) on both Twitter and Instagram can be used to start or contribute to movements on these platforms. You may choose to create your own unique hashtag, but there are benefits to using one that already exists. Using an existing hashtag can associate you with other movements or causes similar to your own and can capture the attention of users who follow those topics. Examples of existing sex ed hashtags include:

- Sex education: *#SexEd #RealSexEd #SexEducation*
- Supporting pregnant and parenting teens: *#NoTeenShame*
- Supporting funding for sex education: *#EvidenceOverIdeology, #NayToSRA*
- Birth Control: *#ThxBC #BirthControlHelpedMe*
- Consent Education: *#TeachThem*

Connect to others and form coalitions:

Social media is an excellent way to find other people with similar interests—and this includes advocacy efforts! When used effectively, social media can be a great place to announce events, form relationships, and bring you closer to your goals. Hosting events like Q&As or live chats on social media can help make people feel like they are a part of something without worrying about barriers to involvement posed by in-person gatherings.

Gaining a social media following:

Building an online community takes some effort! More followers can mean greater support in your advocacy efforts. Here are a few tips for gaining a following on social media:

1. Engage with other users.
 - To expand your platform, your social media activity will need to go beyond making your own informational posts every now and then.
 - Easy ways to engage with other users includes: following accounts with similar goals/messages, sharing posts from other accounts, and responding to comments.
2. Post frequently.
 - You will want to post frequently enough where your followers can rely on your updates or commentary (depending on your platform's purpose), but you are not flooding their feeds with information.

- Most popular platforms have added different methods for posting on your account. For example, Instagram offers the option to add a temporary (24 hour) post to your story, rather than a permanent one on your page. Stories can be a great way to increase your engagement (sharing posts for other users/reminding followers of event dates/etc.) without overpopulating your followers' feeds. Stories can be saved to a "highlight" which will permanently be featured on your Instagram profile. This is a good way to feature an event, project, or other item your organization would like to show off.

TIPS:

If you are using social media to update followers on a meeting with a representative, consider these tips:

- Share how the meeting with the elected official went.
- Keep posts positive or neutral in tone.
- Use the elected official's name in your post (and tag them if they have an account on that platform—make sure it is their official social media account and not their campaign account!)
- Request permission before sharing any photos of other people.
- Include a relevant hashtag.





Social Media Campaigns

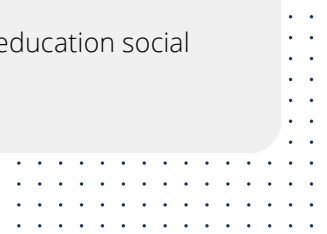
Social media campaigns—or movements—use digital platforms to organize and advocate for a collective goal. They often use hashtags as a means of bringing together contributions to the movement. Social media campaigns may be used to raise awareness of an issue, advocate for a particular policy change, share personal experiences, spread critical information, or all of the above.

When Leading a Social Media Campaign, Consider:

1. What are you advocating for?
 - The answer to this question may determine the content you want to prioritize in your posts. For example, if your ultimate goal is a specific policy change, you will want to share information and stories that convince followers of its necessity.
2. Whose support do you need?
 - Local? National? Identifying your target audience will help you determine how to approach your campaign and more effectively gather support.
3. What is the call to action?
 - You will want to ensure that your posts make it clear to followers what it is you are advocating for and how they can contribute to the cause. ■

EXAMPLE:

[Here](#) is an example of a sex education social media campaign.



Meet the Strengths of Different Social Media Platforms

In addition to considering hashtags and the types of posts you may want to share, different social media platforms have different strengths you should consider when planning social media campaigns.

Twitter

Twitter's fast-paced nature makes the platform ideal for short, to the point messages. This platform works well if you want to post about your campaign goals, uplift messages from other accounts through retweets, reach your decision makers in a way that allows for public engagement from multiple users, or host a "tweet storm". Tweet storms are a scheduled period of time in which several twitter accounts tweet at the same time about a single issue or event and use the same hashtags so the tweets can be identified as part of the same social media campaign. This allows for increased visibility about your message across several twitter accounts.

Instagram

Instagram's platform, based on visual images that have an accompanying message, is ideal for sharing graphics and short messages about your campaign or issue. You may want to create a 3-5 image graphic explaining why your issue is important and share it on your account. You can also follow peers, community members, decision makers, or popular figures to draw further attention to your account and issue. Through Instagram, you may also post graphics that contain information about in-person or virtual events you are hosting. Sharing particularly engaging images and infographics encourages users to share the post in their story and spread awareness about your account and campaign.

Similar to Twitter, you may coordinate to post the same image or message with several other accounts to gain visibility about your campaign and goals.

Facebook

Facebook's broad popularity makes the platform great for reaching audiences of all ages. Through Facebook, you can share longer posts with detailed messages about your campaign and issue. Having a visual aid attached to the message often makes the post more engaging. The Facebook Live feature also allows you to use the platform to schedule events, stream live videos or webinars directly to your followers, or share posts of users who have similar messaging or advocacy goals.

TikTok

TikTok videos are appealing due to the ease in which videos attract viral attention, but you have to be strategic about the way in which you're creating content. To gain attention about your issue or campaign, consider following the format of popular trends and hashtags being used at the moment. This increases the likelihood of your video being featured on the "For You" page where users may come across your video and account.

Key Points:

- It's important to have clear, concise messages.
- State facts to support your position. Include relevant data when applicable.
- Be quotable. Highlight your viewpoint and include positive, succinct quotes from a member of your organization or coalition.
- Remember that most sex education decisions are made at the local level.
- Include a personal story, if applicable, to help you make your point.
- Stick to the point.



X.

Conclusion

Effectively advocating for the rights of young people requires a long-term commitment. Developing your plan, identifying supporters, crafting a clear message, and knowing what you're up against will keep you on the right track. Remember, you're not in this alone! Look to other states and communities to replicate successes and avoid mistakes already made. Add to your message with facts. You can strengthen your case using the [SIECUS State Profiles](#). Your work over time will help to ensure that young people in your community have the information and tools they need to ensure their lifelong sexual health and well-being.

PHOTO BY
DENIN LAWLEY



XI.

Resources



This section will provide helpful examples from the previous sections and planning worksheets to help get you organized.



PHOTO BY
ALLGO APP

Sample Letter to the Editor

March 10, 2021

Dear Editor:

I'm writing to strongly disagree with your editorial on how sex education harms our community and its young people, "[Teaching Sex in Schools?](#)" (3/3/2021).

The reality is that young people are already learning about sex from peers, TV/movies, and the Internet. Treating information like forbidden fruit may make us as adults feel more comfortable, but we are doing a disservice to students who need and will use this education for the rest of their lives.

Numerous studies have found sex education programs that include information on both abstinence and contraception to be effective in helping teens delay sexual intercourse, reduce their number of partners, and increase contraception and condom use when they do become sexually active. This approach to sex education is supported by major medical organizations, including the American Public Health Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, and the Society for Adolescent Medicine.

Nonetheless, our school board members are turning a blind eye to research and compromising the health and well-being of our young people. Parents for Better Education in Anytown believes that our young people deserve better—they have a right to receive open and honest education that provides potentially life-saving information about their sexual health.

Sincerely,
Ann Jones

Ann Jones
President
Parents for Better Education in Anytown
(505) 555-5555
ann@anytownemail.com

Sample Letter to a Policymaker

March 10, 2021

The Honorable Maria Tompkins
Legislative Office Address
Anytown, ST 12345

Dear Ms. Tompkins:

As a constituent, I urge you to ensure that comprehensive sexuality education is available in all schools in your district and across the state.

Numerous studies about sex education programs that include messages about both abstinence and contraception have found them effective in helping young people delay the onset of sexual intercourse, reduce their number of sexual partners, and increase contraception and condom use when they do become sexually active.

In contrast, there is no evidence that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs work. In fact, new research has concluded that some abstinence-only-until-marriage programs may actually be causing harm to young people by undermining the use of safer sex practices when participants do become sexually active.

The great majority of Americans share my support for sex education that is comprehensive in nature. A survey by the Othmer Institute found that 90% of the engaged, voting public believe all students should receive sexuality education that is age-appropriate, medically accurate, and that begins early and continues through high school. Further, this survey found that only 10% of engaged voters support abstinence-only-until-marriage programs being taught in public schools.

Please ensure that no new money is spent on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs and instead much-needed funds are put towards more effective sexuality education. I look forward to hearing from you on this important matter.

Sincerely,
Ann Jones
(505) 555-555
ann@anytownemail.com

Community Action Plan Template

Purpose: Create a “script” for your improvement effort and support.

- Directions:**
1. Using this form as a template, develop an action plan for each goal identified. Modify the form as needed to fit your unique context.
 2. Distribute copies of each action plan to the members of the collaboration.
 3. Keep copies handy to bring to meetings to review and update regularly. You may decide to develop new work plans for new phases of your reform effort.

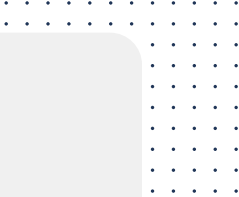
Goal:

Results / Accomplishments:

Action Steps What will be done?	Responsibilities Who will do it?	Timeline By when? (Day/Month)	Resources A. Resources available B. Resources needed (financial, human, political & other)	Potential Barriers A. What individuals or organizations might resist? B. How?	Communications Plan Who is involved? What methods? How often?
Step 1:			A. B.	A. B.	



Action Steps What will be done?	Responsibilities Who will do it?	Timeline By when? (Day/Month)	Resources A. Resources available B. Resources needed (financial, human, political & other)	Potential Barriers A. What individuals or organizations might resist? B. How?	Communications Plan Who is involved? What methods? How often?
Step 2:			A. B.	A. B.	
Step 3:			A. B.	A. B.	



Evidence of Success: (How will you know that you are making progress? What are your benchmarks?)

Evaluation Process: (How will you determine that your goal has been reached? What are your measures?)

Crafting Your Message

Purpose: Use this tool to help craft your message to advance sex education.

Directions:

1. Set a communication goal for your work.
2. Identify the target audience for the message.
3. Identify how you will share your message—e.g. through an op-ed, LTE, or speaking at a meeting.
4. Identify 3–4 key points you want the audience to take away from the message.
5. Note any data or information to strengthen your message.

Crafting Your Message	
Communication Goal	
Target Audience	
Dissemination of Message	
Key Messages	
Supporting Data	

Identifying Supporters and Opponents

Purpose: Use this tool to identify supporters and opponents of the work.

Directions:

1. Identify the major supporters and opponent of sex education at in your state or community.
2. Distribute copies to members of the collaboration.
3. Keep copies handy to bring to meetings to review and update regularly.

Who are My State and Local Champions?			
Who are the major individual voices in sex education?	What organizations support sex education?	What organizations oppose sex education and why?	What are these opponents' strategies at the local, state, and/or national level?



Working with School Boards

Purpose: Create a “script” for your improvement effort and support.

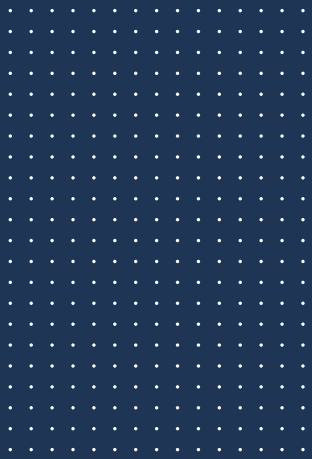
Goal:

Results / Accomplishments:

Preparing for Meeting	Timeline By when? (Day/Month)	Who Needs to Attend	Key Points to Address	Potential Challenges	Next Steps and Follow Up
Step 1:			A. B.	A. B.	



Preparing for Meeting	Timeline By when? (Day/Month)	Who Needs to Attend	Key Points to Address	Potential Challenges	Next Steps and Follow Up
Step 2:			A. B.	A. B.	
Step 3:			A. B.	A. B.	



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