



A guide for Texas parents, students, and community members to support health education in their school district.



www.TexasisReady.org

WELCOME!

In the last few years, big changes were made to sex education standards in Texas. These changes will provide access to medically-accurate sex education to all students across the state. School districts are implementing these new standards, so now it's time for for you to stand up for high quality sex education in your school district.

Texas is a big state, and different communities have different needs, which is why parents, students, and community members like you are the best people to advocate within their own districts.

Texas laws around sex education can be complex and confusing. This guide will help you understand how sex education is provided in Texas and how to be an effective advocate for health education.



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WHY IS SEX EDUCATION IMPORTANT?

As parents, educators, or community members, we want our kids to be healthy from head to toe. And that means providing them with factual, common sense information about how their bodies work.

What is happening with sex education in Texas?

In 2020, the State Board of Education adopted new curriculum standards that guide Health Education, including sex education, statewide. School districts were required to implement the new standards in the 2022-23 school year and adopt curriculum that will teach the new standards. You can play a role by advocating for the sex ed curriculum that is right for your community.

What is sex education?

Newly adopted Texas Health Education curriculum standards on sexual and reproductive health cover a wide range of topics in age-appropriate ways. In elementary school, students learn about healthy friendships and body safety, and in later elementary grades, about changes to expect with puberty. Older students learn about human reproduction, and how to reduce the risk of unintended pregnancy through abstinence, contraception, or condoms. Students also learn about healthy relationships, how to identify and avoid abusive relationships, and topics such as respecting the boundaries of others.

Why should we teach abstinence-plus sex education?

Some sex education only teaches youth about abstinence, or avoiding sex. While this is important, research shows that half of Texas teens will be sexually active by their junior year of high school. "Abstinence-plus" sex education teaches students abstinence is the safest choice, but also provides medically accurate information about topics such as contraception, prevention of sexually transmitted infections, and healthy relationships. Decades of research indicate that abstinence-plus sex education supports healthy outcomes, including delaying the onset of sexual activity and increasing rates of contraceptive use to avoid unintended pregnancies and the transmission of sexually transmitted infections. Texas's new Health Education curriculum standards will expand abstinence-plus education to all students.

Research shows that providing medically accurate information in school doesn't make students more likely to have sex -- and can be effective at delaying sex. Texas currently has the 9th highest rate of teen birth in the nation, with a baby born to a teen parent once every 25 minutes. Though teen birth rates are declining both nationwide and in Texas, rates of sexually transmitted infections are on the rise. Texas students deserve factual information that can help keep them safe and healthy.

Who supports sex education?

Virtually every major medical organization supports sex education that goes beyond abstinence, including groups such as the American Medical Association, American Pediatric Society, Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine, National Association of School Nurses, and National Association of Social Workers. Most importantly, a large majority of parents support abstinence-plus sex education for their own kids.



Texas Adolescent Health

A baby is born to a teen mom in Texas every **25 minutes**

Disparities >>

Factors such as access to health care, information, and economic opportunity can lead to disparities in teen birth rates.

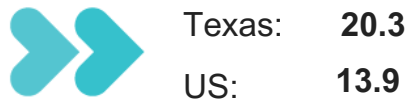
Teen Birth Rate

Hispanic	28.2
Black	22.3
White	11.7
Asian	1.5

In 2021, the Texas birth rate for Hispanic teens was **2.4 times higher** than the rate for white teens.

TEXAS TEEN BIRTHS, 2021

Teen Birth Rate per 1,000

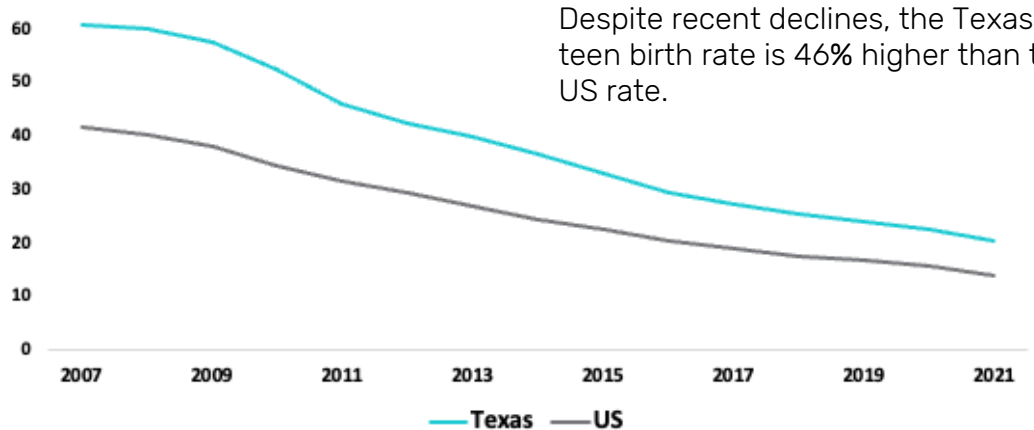


Teen Birth Count

Births to 10-14 year olds:	260
Births to 15-17 year olds:	5,551
Births to 18-19 year olds:	15,490

17% of teen births in Texas are repeat births. **Total Teen Births (10-19) in Texas, 2021: 21,301**

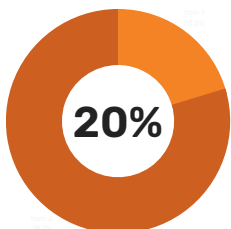
Teen Birth Rate per 1,000 Teens Aged 15-19



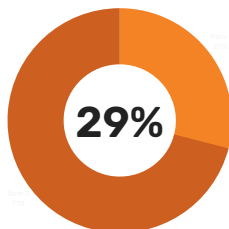
Non-Health Social Factors

Structural issues such as poverty and lack of access to health care can contribute to teen pregnancy rates.

Children Living in Poverty



Young Adults (19-26) Without Health Insurance



Sexually Transmitted Infections

Though teen pregnancy rates are declining, STIs are increasing among Texas youth. Some increase may be due to better screening, but data suggests actual rates are on the rise.

2020 Reported STI Cases & Rates, Youth 15-24, Texas

	Count of new cases, 2020	Change from 2009	2020 Rate per 100,000
HIV	1,081	10%	26
Chlamydia	83,501	12%	2040
Gonorrhea	27,717	48%	677

HOW IS SEX ED TAUGHT IN TEXAS?

For the first time in more than 20 years, Texas leaders have updated the minimum curriculum standards for health education and sex education in public schools.

These new standards, which went into effect in the 2022-23 school year, will expand basic sex education to all Texas students. Many school districts have adopted curriculum to teach the new TEKS.

WHAT are TEKS?

The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (or TEKS for short) are the minimum curriculum standards that school districts must teach to students. Each course has TEKS for each grade level. TEKS are the floor, not the ceiling, and districts can always "teach beyond the TEKS".

The Health Education TEKS are part of the enrichment curriculum. Health TEKS must be provided to students at the elementary and middle school level, but are elective at the high school level.

These standards had not been updated in more than 20 years, but in 2020, the State Board of Education adopted Health TEKS that provide medically accurate information on topics such as biology, puberty, reproduction, healthy relationships, abstinence, contraception, and prevention of sexually transmitted infections. These standards will be offered at both the middle and the high school level, effectively expanding sex education to all Texas students.

WHAT

have districts been
teaching?

School districts are not required to routinely report how they teach sex education, making it difficult to know what's happening across the state. However, a research report found that in the 2015 school year:

- 58% of districts taught "abstinence-only" curricula
- 17% of districts taught "abstinence-plus" curricula
- 25% of districts taught no sex education at all

Additionally, researchers found that some districts rely on curriculum that is fear or shame based and may offer inaccurate information.

HOW

is health education
taught?

It varies. Some schools may have designated Health instructors, or may have science or PE teachers deliver health content. Other schools bring in outside organizations for some parts, including sex education.

Sex ed is often offered through Health class. In 2009, the Legislature removed Health class as a high school graduation requirement. Schools are required to provide health instruction to students at the elementary and middle school levels, but Health class is an elective at the high school level, with many districts not offering it at all.

WHO SETS THE RULES FOR SEX ED IN TEXAS?

There are many layers of control and decision making around sex education in Texas. Additionally, Texas parents have extensive rights around their child's participation in sex education.

SHACs

School Health Advisory Councils, known as SHACs for short, are volunteer groups made up of parents, students, school staff, members of the business, medical, and faith communities. Required under state law, SHACs are charged with ensuring local community values are reflected in health education. They make recommendations to the school board on various topics, including sex ed and abuse prevention curriculum.

Local School Districts

State law gives local school districts a significant amount of control over sex education. A school district board of trustees adopts sex education curriculum, taking into account the recommendation of the SHAC and feedback from the community. The school district also determines whether or not they will offer electives such as high school health classes, and facilitates training of the teachers who will deliver sex education.

State Board of Education

The State Board of Education (SBOE) is a 15-member elected body that sets education policy in Texas. The SBOE is charged with setting minimum curriculum standards for each course, called the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS. The recently adopted Health Education TEKS include sex education. The SBOE also adopts lists of approved textbooks and instructional materials for each course.

Texas Legislature

The Texas Legislature is the top decision maker around sex education. The Legislature sets state law around sex education, including many changes made in the 2021 Legislative Session. The Legislature also determines which courses are required for each grade level and for high school graduation. In 2023, the Legislature did not adopt any bills impacting sex education.

WHAT DOES TEXAS LAW SAY ABOUT SEX EDUCATION?

While school districts have a great deal of local control over sex education, they must follow state law around the content of education materials, the adoption process for curriculum, and parent permission and notification. Most of our laws about sex education and abuse prevention are found in Section 28.004 of the Texas Education Code. These laws cover:

School Health Advisory Councils (SHACs)

The Texas Education Code creates SHACs, which are parent and community volunteer groups charged with ensuring that local community values are reflected in health education instruction. The Education Code requires SHACs to make a recommendation to the school board of which sex education and abuse prevention curriculum should be adopted. Before making the curriculum recommendation, SHACs must hold two public meetings on the issue.

Other SHAC duties include making recommendations for topics such as suicide prevention, opioid abuse prevention, recess policy, and more. SHAC members are appointed by the school board and the SHAC must meet at least 4 times per year. Recently adopted changes to the Education Code requires SHACs to post notice that they will meet at least 72 hours ahead of the meeting. The notice must be posted online and also on campus bulletin boards. After the meeting, SHACs must post meeting minutes and an audio or video recording of each meeting online.

Curriculum Adoption

State law requires curriculum for sex education and prevention of child abuse, family violence, dating violence and sex trafficking to be adopted by school boards, on the recommendation of SHACs, with at least two public SHAC meetings. School boards must issue a resolution instructing SHACs to make a recommendation about sex ed content, and the board must approve the curriculum through a record vote at a public meeting.

Sex Education Content

Instruction related to human sexuality must stress abstinence from sexual activity for students as the preferred and safest choice of behavior and spend more time teaching abstinence than any other topic. If education on contraception and condoms is included, schools must teach "human use reality rates" rather than laboratory rates regarding effectiveness. Schools are not prohibited from conducting condom demonstrations, but they may not distribute condoms as part of a sex ed class. State law does not prohibit instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Parent Rights

School districts must provide extensive notification to parents on the content of sex ed and abuse prevention classes and the approximate date content will be provided. While they previously had the right to opt their children out of sex education, following recent legislative changes, parents now must provide consent to actively opt their children into sex education and abuse prevention instruction. Parents have the right to review curriculum online or at their home campus or have the curriculum emailed to them, and have the right to purchase sex education curriculum. Public domain materials must be posted online. Parents may use the grievance or appeals process to report violations.

What Laws Don't Include

Sex education in Texas is not required under statute, though Health Education is required for middle schoolers and newly adopted curriculum standards include sex education content at the middle school level.

HOW IS SEX ED ADOPTED IN TEXAS?

Texas law requires local school districts to follow a specific process when adopting curriculum for sex education and prevention of child abuse, family violence, dating violence, and sex trafficking. This process is described in the Texas Education Code 28.004. Each step of this process offers an opportunity for public input.

How does the process work?

1. The school board adopts a formal resolution noting the process that the district will use to adopt sex education or abuse prevention curriculum.
2. The school board issues a resolution directing the SHAC to review curriculum and make a recommendation.
3. The SHAC reviews curriculum and holds at least two public meetings before selecting their recommendation.
4. The SHAC presents the curriculum recommendation to the school board. The recommended curriculum must be made publicly available in this process.
5. The school board adopts the curriculum through a record vote at a public meeting.
6. Before campuses provide the new curriculum, they must send extensive notices to parents/guardians describing the content that will be taught. Parents/guardians must provide consent to actively opt their children into sex ed or abuse prevention class.

What is a School Board?

A school board, also known as a board of trustees, is a group of individuals elected to make decisions about a local school district. There are more than 1,000 independent school districts across Texas.

What is a SHAC?

Each Texas school district is required by state law to have a School Health Advisory Council, or SHAC. A SHAC is made up of parent, student, and community volunteers, as well as district staff, appointed by the school board. Students can SHACs are charged with ensuring that local values are reflected in health education.

In addition to sex ed and abuse prevention, SHACS make recommendations on health topics like suicide prevention, opioid prevention, and recess.

Staying in the Know

For busy families, it can be hard to stay on top of all the moving parts when it comes to sex ed and abuse prevention adoption. Here are some things you can do to stay informed:

1. Look for a local group who's already engaged in this work and sign up for alerts.
2. Read your local news, which is likely to cover sex ed curriculum selection.
3. Try to learn the timeline that the district has set for sex ed adoption. When will the important meetings be set? This can help you keep track of opportunities for advocacy.
4. Keep an eye on agenda postings for the school board and SHAC. This can help you know what is set for discussion.
5. Most school districts have communication specialists or parent liaisons who can help you understand the process and timeline. If you're confused, reach out and ask for help.

How can I learn what my SHAC is doing?

- SHACs are required to post meeting agendas on the school website, and on the bulletin board at each campus.
- Many SHACs schedule their meetings in advance, so check on the district's student health page.
- Call school district and ask to speak with the "SHAC Liaison".
- Talk to campus or district nurses. They often are involved with the district health policies.
- Consider applying for your district SHAC.

ADVOCATING FOR SEX ED

While many school district already have selected curriculum materials that align with the newly adopted Health Education Standards, others are still in the process. It's important that parents, students, and community members step up and advocate for better sex education.

Here are some steps you can take:

- Look for groups who are already engaged in this topic in your district. They can help you stay informed on things like important dates for advocacy.
- Apply to serve on your district SHAC.
- Look online or reach out to the district to find out when the SHAC is meeting and what is on the meeting agenda.
- Consider attending the SHAC public meetings to voice your support for medically accurate sex education.
- Write a letter to your school board members letting them know that you support medically accurate sex education for your children.
- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper, or see if news station would cover a story on sex education.
- Reach out to your friends, neighbors and community members to encourage them to engage in this process.
- If you are hearing inaccurate messages being spread about a sex ed curriculum under consideration, provide accurate information.
- If you are a student enrolled in the school, keep your classmates informed about what is going on and encourage them to attend meetings or reach out to school board members. Students can be powerful advocates for health education.

Understanding Sex Education Curriculum

Many sex education curricula have been rigorously evaluated for effectiveness, looking at outcomes such as reduced rates of teen pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections, greater use of condoms, reduced rates of sexual activity, etc. Public Health experts recommend using these "evidence-based programs," or EBPs, for sex education.

School districts may also adopt Health textbooks that are approved as meeting all health standards. Though not rigorously evaluated for effectiveness, the newly adopted standards do include important content on topics such as contraception, STI prevention, and healthy relationships. Districts are not required to use textbooks that have been approved by the State Board of Education.

Questions to Ask

- What sex education curriculum is being proposed?
- Who designed or is offering the curriculum?
- Who will teach this curriculum?
- Is the curriculum medically accurate?
- Has it been evaluated for effectiveness?
- Does the curriculum align with new Health TEKS, including instruction on topics like contraception?
- Does the curriculum used shame-based techniques?
- Is the curriculum inclusive of LGBTQ youth?

The Basics of Advocacy Outreach

Advocacy simply means trying to shape public policy, laws, or rules. While advocacy can take many forms depending on what you're fighting for, there are some common threads.

Your personal expertise and experience is invaluable. Story-telling is the most powerful tool for changing minds. As you engage in this advocacy, share personal stories and experiences that bring your positions to life.

Before you reach out, do a little research to get a basic understanding of what beliefs the person is likely to hold, and craft your message accordingly. Most people support sex education, but at times, it can be a divisive and ideologically sensitive issue. Remember that not everyone will agree with you. You may find agreement on some points but not others. Stay respectful and look for common ground. After all, we all want what's best for Texas kids.

School board trustees are not paid for their service. They may have full time jobs outside of their unpaid work on the school board. They have a duty to their constituents -- that's you! -- but they may be juggling a stressful job with public service in a time of global crisis. SHAC members are not elected and are volunteers similar to the PTA.

Like your grandma said, you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. Granted, there are some situations where it's appropriate to be angry, and show it. But we typically recommend trying to stay respectful and positive.

Show your appreciation! After speaking with a member or providing public comment in a meeting, remember to thank them for their time and their public service. A thank you email is a good moment to add any points that you may have forgotten in the initial call or email.

Important Questions

Who

am I advocating to?

Find out who is making decisions, and research what views they are likely to hold.

What

am I asking them to do?

Be clear on what you're asking for, so you can make that central to your message.

Why

is my message compelling?

Use personal stories and high impact data points to craft a compelling message.

How

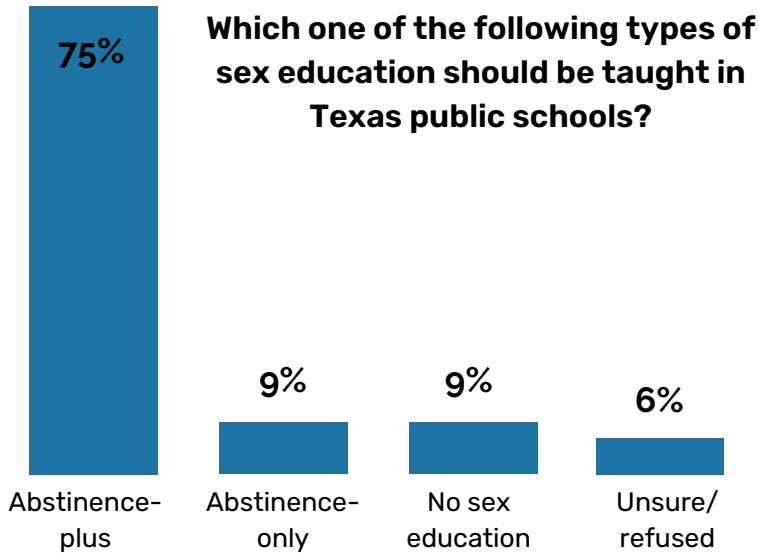
will I reach them?

Reach out to the district if you need help finding contact or meeting information.

PUBLIC OPINION POLL RESULTS

TEXAS VOTERS SUPPORT ABSTINENCE-PLUS SEX ED

Texas voters agree that our youth deserve access to medically accurate, age-appropriate sexual health education. The dialogue around sex education can be divisive, but polling consistently shows that sex education is not a highly partisan issue for most people - it's just common sense.

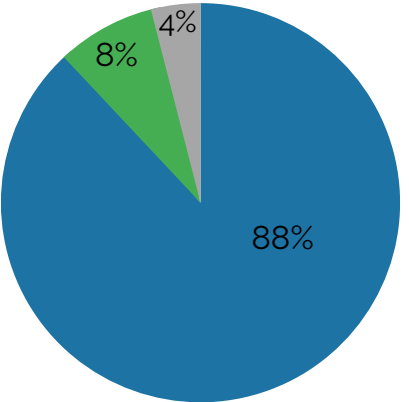


When asked what should be taught in public schools, 75% of poll respondents, including 68% of Republicans, support teaching abstinence-plus sex education, defined as curricula that "teaches students abstinence is the safest choice, but also provides medically accurate information about topics such as contraception, prevention of sexually transmitted infections, and healthy relationships." More than 2/3 of voters across all political affiliations, geographic regions, genders, and ethnicities support abstinence-plus sex ed in schools.

TEXAS VOTERS AGREE

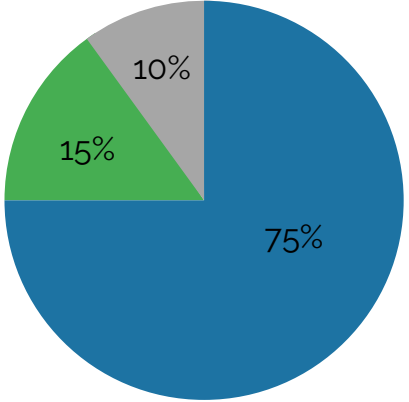
Consent & Boundaries

88% of respondents, including 86% of Republicans, agree that "It's important for students to learn about consent, including respecting the boundaries set by other people about their bodies."



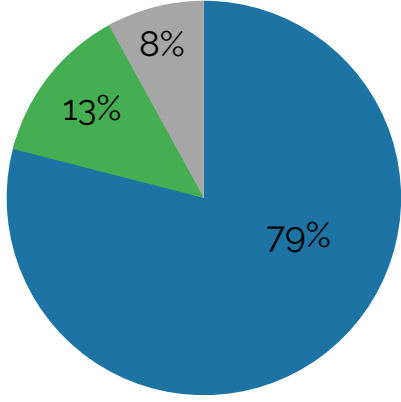
Inclusivity

75% of respondents, including 65% of Republicans, agree that "To help prevent bullying of LGBTQ youth, Texas public schools should include standards around cultivating respect for all people, regardless of their sexual orientation or identity."



Contraception & Condoms

79% of respondents, including 72% of Republicans, agree that, "Along with abstinence, sex education in public schools should teach students about condoms and contraception."

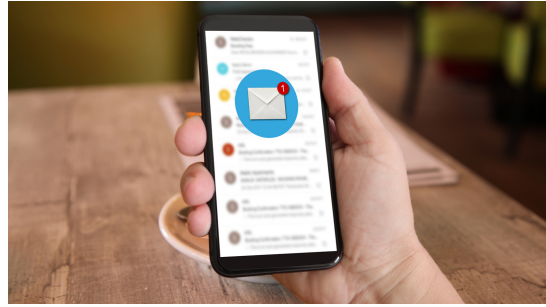




OPT-IN TO SEX EDUCATION

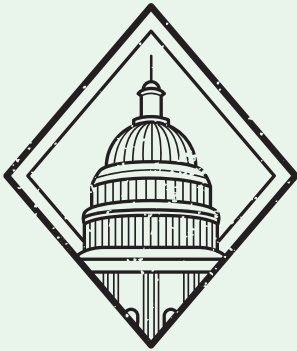
Texas parents now must sign a permission slip to opt their children into sex education or abuse prevention.

This could be a paper form sent home in your child's backpack, or could arrive in an email.



If you don't sign the form, your child won't be able to take sex education.

WHY DID THIS CHANGE?



Previously, parents could choose to opt their children out of sex education. A new law passed in the 2021 Texas Legislative Session made a number of changes to the process school districts must use to adopt sex education. House Bill 1525 also changed Texas sex ed law from "opt-out" to "opt-in," joining just four other states with this policy. In a special session, SB 9 expanded all laws that govern sex ed to also apply to instruction on child abuse, family violence, dating violence, or sex trafficking. While Texas has long supported the rights of parents to remove their children from sex ed classes, research shows that most parents want their children to receive age-appropriate, medically accurate information about sexual health. If a busy parent or guardian misses the permission slip in the bottom of the backpack, their child could miss out on crucial health information.

WHAT WILL TEXAS SEX ED INCLUDE?

Texas recently updated the minimum curriculum standards for health education. The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS, had not been updated for Health Education in more than 20 years. These new standards, which went into effect in the 2022-23 school year, provide age-appropriate, medically accurate information to middle and high school students on topics such as biology, puberty, reproduction, abstinence, contraception, preventing sexually transmitted infections, and healthy relationships. Some school districts may choose to teach additional content on topics such as LGBTQ inclusivity.

What are Parent Rights?

Under the Texas Education Code 28.004, parents have the right to:

- 1. Have a say in which sex ed curriculum is adopted.** Parents, guardians, and community members may attend the two public meetings of the School Health Advisory Council (SHAC) prior to a sex ed curriculum recommendation being made to the school board, and may attend and provide public comment at the school board meeting at which the sex ed curriculum is adopted.
- 2. Decide whether or not their child will receive sex education.** From 2021 - 2023, parents must provide written consent to opt their children into sex education. Parents can also choose to opt their children into some lessons but opt out of other lessons. Schools may not penalize the student in any way for opting out of any sex ed classes.
- 3. Receive notification of what sex education will be provided.** Schools must provide written notifications to parents with detailed information on what the sex ed curriculum will include and a general schedule the content will be provided. The notice must also include an overview of state law around sex education; a statement of the parent's right to review curriculum materials; information on how parents can be involved in the SHAC process; and a statement of parents' rights to use grievance or appeals process.
- 4. Review all sex education curriculum materials.** Under new laws, parents or guardians may review all sex ed curriculum materials at their child's home campus or request that electronic materials be shared electronically. If school districts are using public domain (non-copyrighted) materials, they must post those materials online. For purchase agreements entered into after Sept. 1, 2021, schools must ensure that parents can purchase curriculum materials at the same price paid by the school.
- 5. File a grievance or appeal if any of these rights are violated.**



Visit TexasIsReady.org to stay up to date on sex ed.

About Us

Who we are and where we started.

The Texas Is Ready Coalition's vision is that every Texas youth deserves the information they need for a lifetime of healthy relationships and positive sexual health outcomes. What began as a collaboration between three organizations has now merged into one, Healthy Futures of Texas. We are a statewide, non-profit, nonpartisan organization. The mission of Healthy Futures of Texas is to improve the well-being of young Texans through equitable access to sexual health education, contraception, and resources. We address the increasing barriers that young people in Texas face to obtain quality sex education, access to contraception and sexual healthcare. For the first time in more than two decades, Texas has revised its sex ed curriculum standards. We continue to work to ensure that the updated standards are implemented effectively and that school districts and communities have the resources needed to deliver medically accurate, developmentally appropriate instruction to students.

For our work on the Health Education TEKS, the Texas is Ready coalition partners have received the following honors:

- ★ Excellence in Adolescent Health Award, Adolescent Health Initiative, 2021
- ★ Texas Partner for Change Award from the Texas Council on Family Violence, 2021



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