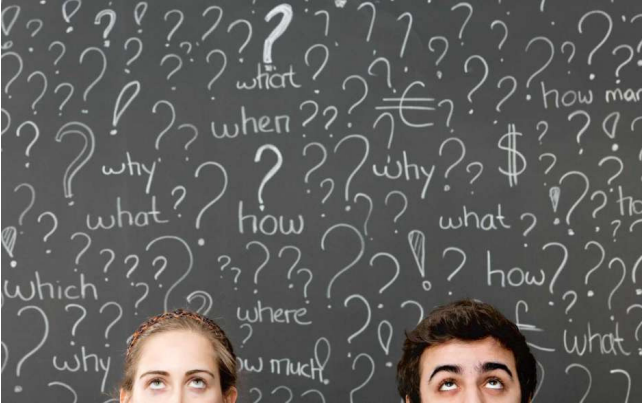


## Sex ed in Texas needs to go beyond teaching abstinence [Opinion]

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By Molly Clayton, July 8, 2019



It's been two decades since Texas last visited the health curriculum. That year — 1997 — Google was founded, the Clinton-Lewinsky affair made headlines, Titanic swept the Oscars, and I registered for my first email address. Culture, politics, and technology have changed a lot since then.

Thankfully, over the next year, the State Board of Education is set to revise the state's health curriculum, updating the standards that guide classroom education statewide. That revision presents a rare and important opportunity to empower Texas youth to make informed decisions about their health and their futures. The process, though, is off to a worrying start: A key advisory panel includes several members who professionally oppose contraception and access to comprehensive sex education.

This is a problem. Sex education — along with other key subjects such as nutrition, mental health and physical safety — is part of that health curriculum, and research shows us what high-quality, effective sexual health education looks like. Students at all grade levels should learn healthy relationship skills, including respect, communication, consent and refusal.

They need basic facts about their bodies, such as how the reproductive system works and how our bodies change over a lifetime. They need medically accurate information on avoiding unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. And they need all of this information delivered in an inclusive curriculum and framework that respects the diverse lives and family circumstances of all students.

What's more, research also shows that an overwhelming majority of parents, Republican and Democrat alike, support this kind of comprehensive sexual health education.

All Texas students need to be prepared with this knowledge before they become sexually active. For districts that choose to teach sex ed, current Texas law requires abstinence to be taught as the "preferred choice of behavior for unmarried people of school age." Abstinence is absolutely an effective strategy to avoid an unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection — but like any other method of pregnancy prevention, people may fail to use it consistently. Though sexual activity among teens has declined slightly, 63 percent of Texas students become sexually active before graduating high school. Furthermore, countless studies show that an abstinence-only approach typically is ineffective in delaying sexual activity.

Research has also debunked the myth that educating teens about sex makes them more likely to have sex. Refusing to provide information about contraception just makes teens less likely to protect themselves when they do.

We have seen a dramatic decline in teen pregnancy rates nationally and in Texas over the past two decades. But the Lone Star State consistently maintains one of the nation's highest rates of both teen birth and repeat teen birth. More than 27,000 babies were born to Texas teens between the ages of 15 and 19 in 2017, and about 300 babies were born last year to Texas children between the ages of 10 and 14.

Parents continue to be the most trusted source of information about sex for their kids. But schools can play a critical role too, as noted in the health-curriculum recommendations by Texas Education Agency Commissioner Mike Morath. His report cites teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections as serious health issues and outlines the comprehensive approach needed to promote health literacy and healthy behaviors — an approach that involves not just schools but also families and communities.

A comprehensive, data-driven approach that considers disparities, respects differences, and empowers young people to make the healthiest choices based on their life circumstances and goals would be most effective in preparing all students to make healthy reproductive choices.

The Texas State Board of Education has a unique opportunity to ensure that schools provide reliable, accurate information to keep students safe and healthy. Texas voters are counting on them to take it.



**Molly Clayton**

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