

# Sex Education in Wisconsin Public Schools: Why Oppose a State-Mandated Curriculum?



The Wisconsin Legislature is currently considering a proposal known as the “Healthy Youth Act” (Assembly Bill 458 and Senate Bill 324). These bills would revise existing law regarding human growth and development (sex education) instruction in Wisconsin’s public schools. The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) opposes this legislation and has prepared the following Q&A for parents, teachers, and other concerned citizens. An accompanying WCC *Issue Brief* provides further information on current law and the proposed changes.

## **Q. Why should I oppose this legislation?**

**A.** There are a number of reasons to oppose this legislation, but the primary reason is that these bills substitute the judgment of the state for that of parents and local school committees on a topic that is deeply personal and where parental guidance is especially important to a child’s development.

## **Q. How is this proposed legislation different from current law?**

**A.** The WCC *Issue Brief* outlines all the differences, but the most significant one is that the Healthy Youth Act would limit the options currently available to school districts by mandating that only so-called “comprehensive” sex education be taught in the public schools if any instruction in human growth and development is offered.

Currently, local advisory committees comprised of parents, teachers, school administrators, students, health care professionals, clergy, and other community members assist school districts with the development, review, and implementation of human growth and development curricula. These committees have the flexibility to select curricula that are the most appropriate for their students and that best reflect the community’s values. The two major types of curricula that school districts can choose from are comprehensive sex education and abstinence-based education.

## **Q. How do comprehensive sex education and abstinence-based education differ?**

**A.** The content of the curricula vary from program to program, but generally speaking, comprehensive sex education covers reproductive and sexual anatomy, self-image, sexual orientation, sexual decision-making, drugs and alcohol, relationships, abstinence, the health benefits and side effects of proper use of contraception, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Abstinence-based programs focus on establishing goals and boundaries for a successful future, self-respect, character development, relationships, effects of pornography and sex in the media, sexual decision-making, resisting peer pressure, STIs, the limitations of contraceptives (including potential abortifacient effects), drugs and alcohol, marriage and family.

Abstinence-based programs, though secular, generally support the teachings of the Church on the positive gifts of sexuality and its role within marriage. Comprehensive sex education generally, and as defined in these bills, does not discourage the use of contraception and sex outside of marriage. This ambivalence can confuse children whose parents teach them that both are inappropriate.

**Q. If the Healthy Youth Act passes, will school districts still be free to choose either curricula for their human growth and development classes?**

A. No. The Act mandates comprehensive sex education.

**Q. If the Healthy Youth Act passes, can students be exempted from the requirement to complete instruction in human growth and development?**

A. Yes, upon the written request of a parent or guardian.

**Q. The stated aim of the Healthy Youth Act is the reduction of sexually transmitted infections and teen pregnancy. Isn't it good to try and reduce these?**

A. Absolutely, but the best way to do this is to reduce teen sexual activity, which is the goal of abstinence-based programs. The more often a person is sexually active, even when using contraception, the greater the chances of contracting an STI or becoming pregnant. There are also serious psychological, emotional, and spiritual difficulties that can result from sexual activity outside of marriage.

**Q. Does comprehensive sex education work?**

A. Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) has taught some form of comprehensive sex education for years and the district has the highest rates of teen pregnancy and STIs in the state. This alone underscores the need for other approaches to sex education.

**Q. So if comprehensive sex education is already being used in some school districts, is this bill really necessary?**

A. No. In fact, MPS just revised its human growth and development curriculum along the lines proposed by the Healthy Youth Act, so current law is no impediment to teaching comprehensive sex education. The Healthy Youth Act, on the other hand, restricts the ability of local school districts to offer effective abstinence-based curricula.

**Q. What can I do to make my voice heard in opposition to this bill?**

A. Since the Assembly has already passed its version of the bill, please contact your State Senator urging that he or she oppose any further advancement of Assembly Bill 458 and Senate Bill 324. Personal contact through letters and phone calls is most effective. To find contact information for your State Senator, go to [www.legis.state.wi.us](http://www.legis.state.wi.us), or call the Legislative Hotline at 1-800-362-9472.

**Q. How can I learn more about this issue?**

A. Read the WCC *Issue Brief* "Sex Education in Public Schools." For more information, visit the WCC website, [www.wisconsinatholic.org](http://www.wisconsinatholic.org), or contact the WCC, 608/257-0004. Catholic resources on chastity are available at the *Theology of the Body for Teens* website (<http://www.tobforteens.com>). The Wisconsin Abstinence Coalition (<http://wiabco.org>) has additional resources and is affiliated with the National Abstinence Education Association ([www.abstinenceassociation.org](http://www.abstinenceassociation.org)).