



educateUS
SIECUS IN ACTION



**Messages
that Move
Action for
Sex Education**



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Purpose

Poll after poll reveals the same thing: sex education enjoys broad support across the United States. But moving people to turn that support into action has proven a challenge. The need for more effective messages that inspire people to take useful action to defend and advance sex ed policy is clear.

Too many campaigns for public school relationships and sexuality education focus on a narrow, stigma- and fear-based message about teen pregnancy and STI prevention. The problem with this approach is twofold: first, many parents don't want to think about these issues. They don't think their kids will have sex while still teenagers at all, so they don't believe their children need this kind of prevention effort. Second, this messaging undersells the culturally transformative potential of universal sex education, missing out entirely on the chance to inspire voters to get involved in making real, meaningful positive change in their communities, and for the young people in their lives.

Meanwhile, opponents of public school relationships and sexuality education are telling a compelling story full of urgency and emotion, one in which children are the victims, educators and advocates are the villains, and parents can be heroes.

We set out to develop even more compelling messages -- ones that efficiently neutralize and outperform current opposition messaging, while being bold, positive and grounded enough to motivate millions of voters with our vision of universal sex education as a direct path to a flourishing future for all. This report details what we've found so far, with a special emphasis on practical results.

We hope you'll put these messages to good use in your work, and that you'll let us know how they perform for you!

The Baseline for Sex Ed Action

THE QUESTIONS WE ASKED IN THIS STUDY WERE ABOUT ACTION, NOT SIMPLY SUPPORT

Specifically, we asked respondents to tell us how likely they were to:

- **vote** for a pro-sex-ed candidate in November's election
- **share** a pro-sex-ed post on social media, and
- **take** action to advance sex ed policy, like contacting a legislator

Most respondents answered these questions after seeing one or more messages about sex education. But the placebo group saw a neutral message – in this case, it was the text from an ad for Honda. Because questions about sex ed activism have not been well studied, we're sharing some of the takeaways from the placebo group respondents, which can be taken as a baseline snapshot of who's ready to take action for sex ed right now, and who is going to need more persuasion.

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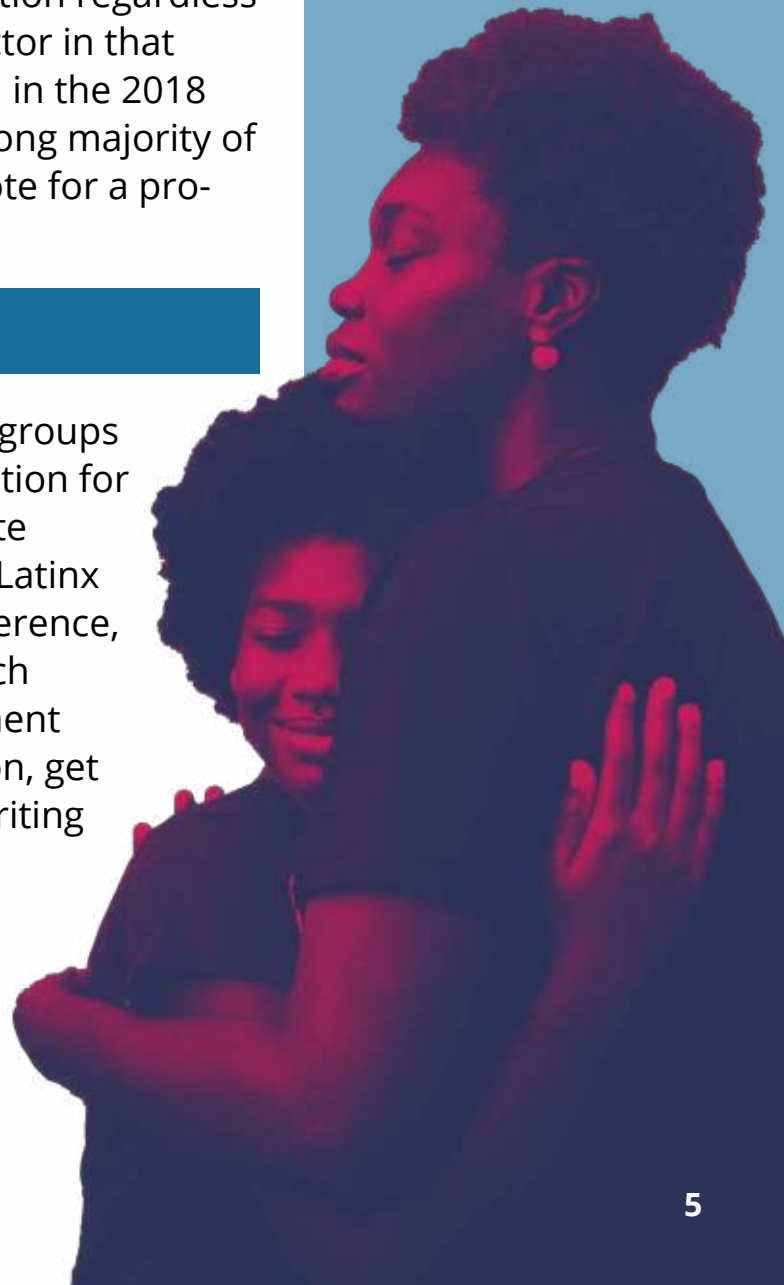
MOST VOTERS WANT TO VOTE FOR PRO-SEX-ED CANDIDATES

We consistently found that, without being exposed to our messages, 45% of a nationwide sample of people aged 18 and up reported being either “likely” or “very likely” to vote for a candidate who openly supports relationships and sexuality education in public schools in the upcoming November elections. But our testing includes both voters and non-voters, and we theorize that the non-voters would often answer “not likely” to this question regardless of how they feel about sex ed. When we factor in that only 54% of voting-eligible Americans voted in the 2018 midterms, we believe that means that a strong majority of people who intend to vote are looking to vote for a pro-sex-ed candidate this fall.

PEOPLE OF COLOR ARE OUR BASE

On average, people of color in our placebo groups reported being 13.5% more likely to take action for public school sex ed compared to their white counterparts in our testing, with Black and Latinx people in the lead. That’s an enormous difference, and it demonstrates the need to invest much more heavily in building trust and engagement with communities of color. Voter registration, get out the vote programs, lobby days, letter writing campaigns – most of our organizing and advocacy activities should center people of color.

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Of course, the reverse is also true: given our significant findings across all of our tests, we expect white people to need more persuading when asked to participate in political action on behalf of sex ed. For research and insight into how to persuade white women in particular, we recommend the work of [Galvanize Action](#).

**PEOPLE ARE JUST AS WILLING TO CALL
THEIR LEGISLATORS AS THEY ARE TO POST
THEIR VIEWS TO SOCIAL MEDIA.**

When we designed our study, we expected to find that voting would be the most popular of the three actions we were testing on, which it was. But we also expected to find that people would be more likely to want to post about their support for sex ed on social media than they would to call their legislator. However, we found no meaningful difference between people's willingness to post to social media versus their willingness to call an elected official to advocate for better sex ed policy. So don't be shy about those advocacy asks!

“

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”




Use These Messages!

The messages we developed are all based on the [Race Class Narrative structure](#), which has been both deeply researched and well-tested in the field, and both researchers and advocates consistently find evidence that the RCN moves persuadable people away from bias and toward action in support of progress.

You'll note that each message has the same key components:

- opens with a **statement of a value that is shared across difference**, and that difference is also named
- **names not just the problem**, but the people who are causing it and their motive
- follows the description of opposition with a **unifying call to action**
- closes with an **emotionally evocative vision** of the better future we can create together if we take that action

All of these components together, in this order, are what gives the Race Class Narrative its power. But you don't have to use our messages word-for-word. The power of each of these messages is in the story they are telling and the way they tell it. Consider them sketches or outlines. As long as you tell the same story with the same key beats, you can swap in details that are specific to your own work and your own communities – the name of the bill you're advocating for, the names of the people who are opposing your work, your own stories that support the ideas in these messages, etc.



Below are our two most successful messages out of over a dozen we tested. We tested each of our top messages against two different opposition messages. One was a “parents rights” message (arguing that school-based sex ed is trying to indoctrinate children and that sex ed should be left to parents to teach), and the other was a “groomer” attack (alleging that school-based sex ed is a method of preparing children to acquiesce to abuse).

In addition to mobilizing those we consider our base - people of color, Democrats and liberal-identifying folks, women, urban dwellers, and other regularly targeted demographic subgroups - we found particular success across a few unexpected demographic subgroups, which we note in the “Additional Messaging Guidance” section.

**Here are the two
most effective
messages you
should use in
your advocacy:**




PROTECT MAJORITY RIGHTS

This is our top all-around performer. If you're looking for a message that is likely to neutralize both the "parents rights" and "groomer" opposition attacks (and do better than neutralize in some conditions!), this is the message to use.

Studies show that no matter where we live or who we love, most of us want young people to receive relationships and sexuality education at school -- including most parents. We know that when young people have the support of well-trained educators in learning about themselves and their boundaries, they do better. This kind of education protects young people against bullying and abuse, helps them develop healthy relationship skills, and improves their academic performance.

But certain politicians are trying to get and hold onto power by waging a war on our young people. They're more than willing to leave our young people vulnerable and trample the rights of the majority if it helps them raise money from their base. We see this in how they are trying to erase Black history from the curriculum, their efforts to ban books, and their opposition to public school relationships and sexuality education, even though every parent always has the right to opt their individual children out of sex ed lessons.

By joining together to take action for public school relationships and sexuality education, we can protect the rights of the vast majority of parents -- and make our schools a place where every child can get the education they need to truly thrive.



“Most of us have a deep need to see people like ourselves represented in the world around us.”

STUDENT REPRESENTATION

This message was the clear strongest performer of all the messages we tested when used against a “parents rights” message, or with no opposition message at all. But it is considerably less effective than “Which Parents Have Rights?” when used against the “groomer” attack.

Whether we're 8 years old or 80, most of us have a deep need to see people like ourselves represented in the world around us. Public school students are no different. They need to see themselves represented in the curriculum that's being taught to them -- especially in subjects like relationships and sexuality education. Every student comes to sex ed with a different set of questions and concerns, which is why they deserve to be taught a well-tested curriculum by experienced teachers who can make sure every student gets the answers they need to thrive.

Some people are spreading lies and misinformation about the curriculum. They seem to think that if they erase certain kinds of information from the curriculum, the students who need that information will stop existing in real life. But this approach hurts every student, whether they need that particular information or not. Studies show that inclusive relationships and sexuality education decreases bullying and harassment in school, increases academic performance for students who receive it, and makes students more likely to stick up for each other if they see someone being bullied. So let's not just say it gets better. By joining together to take action for relationships and sexuality education, we can make sure that schools strengthen students, not silence them.

HERE'S JUST ONE EXAMPLE OF HOW YOU CAN USE THIS STORY WITH YOUR OWN WORDS AND SPECIFICS:

I don't know about you, but it definitely matters to me to see people who are like me on TV, in elected office – really everywhere. Most people I know, whatever their age, race or gender, feel the same. Students too. It makes such a difference to young people when they can see themselves in the lessons they're getting at school -- especially in subjects like relationships and sexuality education. Every student has different questions and different things they're stressing about, and I think they deserve to get their sex ed from a well-tested curriculum by experienced teachers who are going to care about them and make sure they get what they need.

The Moms for Liberty people are spreading lies about what's being taught for sex ed. They act like erasing certain kinds of information from the curriculum will make the students who need that information go away and just stop existing in real life. But they're actually just hurting every student in our Smith County schools. I've seen studies proving that inclusive relationships and sexuality education decreases bullying and harassment in school, helps young people do better in their classes, and makes students more likely to stick up for each other if they see someone being bullied.

So let's not just say it gets better. If we stick together to insist that the Smith County School Board votes yes on this new curriculum, we can make sure that our schools are making young people stronger, not silencing them.

OUR
MESSAGING

+

YOUR
APPLICABLE
DETAILS

=

THE MOST
EFFECTIVE
MESSAGE!

Additional Messaging Guidance

STORIES OVER TALKING POINTS

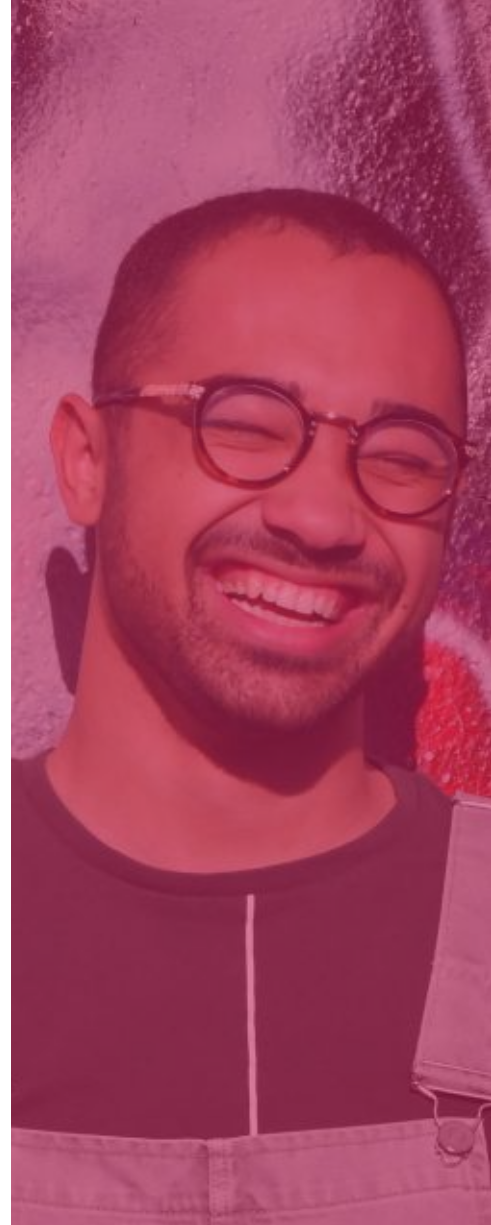
Whenever possible, use the whole message. We have developed these messages as stories, not talking points, because they're more effective that way. In fact, we broke down "Student Representation" and "Protect Majority Rights" into smaller talking points and tested those talking points individually. None of the talking points performed as well as the whole message did, and most produced no meaningful effect at all.

NAME YOUR VILLAIN

That said, the best-performing component of "Student Representation," when we tested the distinct talking points, was the middle, which names the opposition and their motives. Specifically, the snippet reads:

"Certain politicians are trying to get and hold onto power by waging a war on our young people. We see this in how they are trying to erase Black history from the curriculum, their efforts to ban books, and their opposition to public school relationships and sexuality education, even though every parent always has the right to opt their individual children out of sex ed lessons. By joining together to take action for public school relationships and sexuality education, we can protect the rights of the vast majority of parents -- and make our schools a place where every child can get the education they need to truly thrive."

TIP: Naming a villain doesn't have to be partisan! You can call your villain "our extremist opponents" or "the opponents of this bill." You can name a person or organization leading the opposition's charge. Get creative!



That this is the part of the message that made the most impact on its own aligns with the existing extensive research on the Race Class Narrative's use of a 'villain statement': people are more motivated to take action when they can play a hero to someone else's villain – so if we want them to take action, we have to give them a villain to take on.

Sometimes advocates can feel a little hesitant to do this, but two things remain true: Our opposition has no qualms about calling us villains and ascribing motives to us. And our movements and messages are strengthened when we don't shy away from appropriately calling out the opposition and their viewpoints.

MAKE STUDENTS AND PARENTS THE STAR

As you can tell, our most successful messages feature students and parents at the center. We tested two different messages centering teachers and schools, and they both failed. So keep your focus on students and parents.

ON CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION

"Sex ed prevents child abuse" is not only true, but also seems like a natural counter-argument to opposition who claim that sex ed is "grooming" children. So we tested two versions of a message that centers on the fact that sex education is proven to reduce the risk of child abuse.



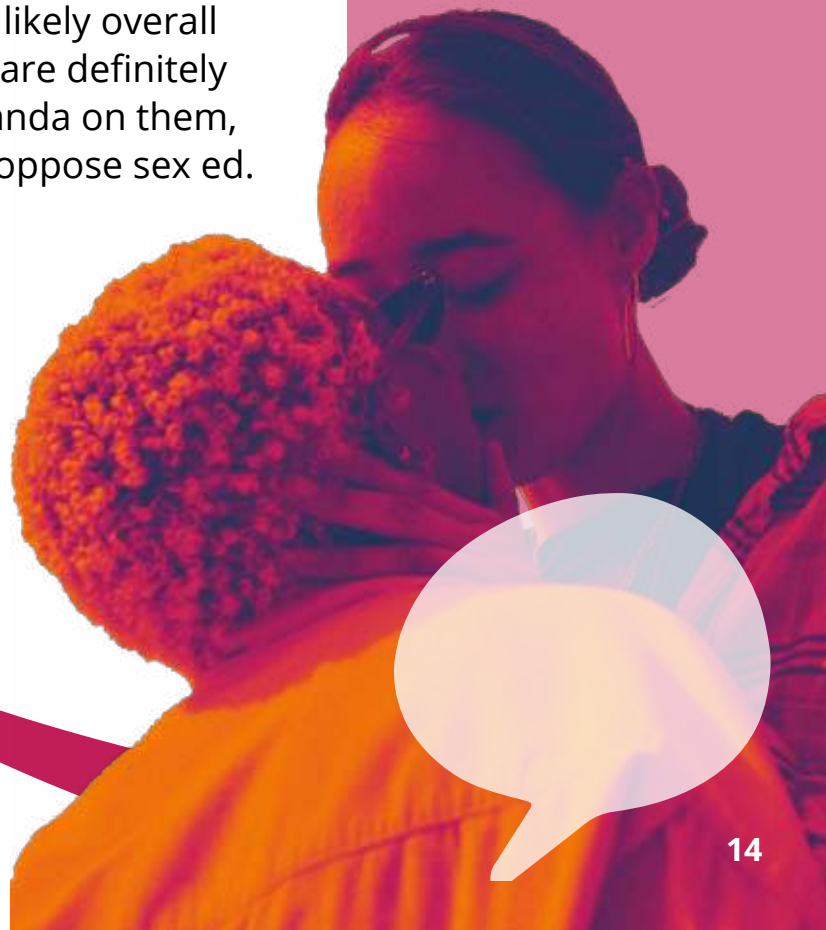
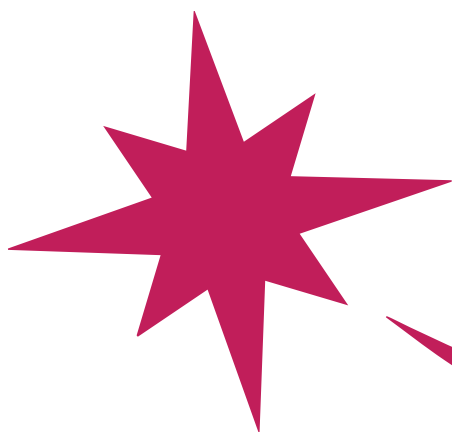
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Unfortunately, not only did they both fail, they both created a backlash effect, making people who heard them less likely to want to take action for sex ed than the people who only heard a placebo message. Perhaps this is because reminding people of child abuse, in whatever context, makes them more fearful. We are hoping to explore more approaches to this message in future tests, but for now, we advise against using this kind of a message.

DON'T SKIP CONSERVATIVES

Both of our top messages effectively neutralize the impact of both the “parents rights” and “groomer” attacks with self-identified conservatives. In many cases, “Protect Majority Rights” does better than neutralizing, actively persuading conservatives to take action for sex ed at a rate higher than those who didn’t see any opposition message at all. So don’t assume that conservatives aren’t worth your time – they need to hear from us with an effective message, too. They may be less likely overall to take action with us, but our messages are definitely blunting the effect of opposition propaganda on them, making them less likely to take action to oppose sex ed.

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OTHER NOTABLE PERSUADABLES

People who describe themselves as “rural” start out with a lower-than-average baseline for taking action. But, after experiencing our more successful messages, they proved quite persuadable. Insights from one of our focus groups sheds some potential light on this finding. In it, participants shared that parents in rural communities are often worried that their young people are not receiving the same relationships and sexuality education that their more urban counterparts are, and these parents don’t want their kids to miss out, nor do they want to be left stranded, solely responsible for informing their children.

Similarly, while less motivated overall than parents/guardians of kids under 18, people who don’t have kids under 18 at home responded well to our top performing messages, especially when the opposition message they’re exposed to is “parents rights.” It’s not only parents and students who can be persuaded to take action for sex education!

FOR MORE MESSAGING INSIGHTS:

Be sure to check out our [So You Want to Speak Up for Sex Ed guide](#) to advocating for relationships and sexuality education at public meetings. And we highly recommend checking out the [continually-updated guidance](#) from ASO Communications, on a wide range of relevant topics.



Methodology

EducateUS fielded 8 surveys using the Grow Progress Rapid Message Test platform between June 21 and July 26, 2022. We began with a slate of seven messages which adopted the “messaging architecture” of the Race Class Narrative and were refined through feedback from five focus groups led by Jaclyn Friedman and Monika Nayak between April 4 and June 1, 2022. This research was made possible by a generous gift from Stephanie Connaughton.

For each message test, GrowProgress used panel partnerships to recruit approximately 400 respondents per EducateUS message and placebo message. Each test sample was recruited to be nationally representative of the general U.S. adult population. Surveys asked respondents a series of demographic questions for subgroup analyses for those groups where the subgroup population sample was substantial enough to obtain a significant meaningful result. And surveys asked respondents a series of three success questions to gauge the hypothetical influence of the given message on willingness to take political action:

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- How likely are you to **vote for a candidate** who openly supports relationships and sexuality education in public schools in the upcoming November elections?
- How likely are you to **share a social media post** in support of public school relationships and sexuality education?
- How likely are you to take action to support public school relationships and sexuality education, such as **contacting your elected representative**?



Survey takers could respond with one of the following options: Very likely, Likely, Neither Likely Nor Unlikely, Unlikely, or Very Unlikely. We derived message success through response comparisons on these three success questions to a non-political placebo message, in this case, a brief positive message about Honda dealerships.

We fielded four surveys where respondents viewed one of two opposition messages using prevalent rhetoric approaches publicly deployed by sex education opponents. For each of those survey instruments which posed an opposition message prior to sharing an EducateUS message deemed to be meaningful through the precursory testing, we fielded one survey to a sample of general population adults and one survey to a sample of a nationally representative sample of People of Color. This measure was meant to increase our potential to discern a meaningful difference between the placebo message and a message treatment group among people who identified as Black or Latino, given these subgroup population sizes in the general population surveys were not great enough to pose meaningful conclusions.

Please email Jaclyn Friedman at jfriedman@educateusaction.org for detail on opposition messages and any further specifics of the survey methodology if you are interested.



Next Steps

We're already hard at work planning (and fundraising for) our next round of message testing. If you have ideas you'd like for us to test, or if you have feedback on how these messages work for you in practice, we're all ears. Please also reach out if you are interested in any of the other messages we tested or with learning more about our demographic subgroup takeaways.

Get in touch with EducateUS Founder & Executive Director at jfriedman@educateusaction.org.