



**Message
Testing
Report 2024**



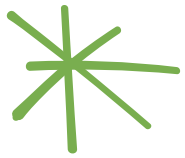


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Purpose

Even after years of targeted attacks, school-based sex education enjoys broad support across the United States. In fact, in 2023, Planned Parenthood found that 96% of parents believe it's important to teach sex education in high schools, and 84% want it in middle school. But moving people to turn that support into action remains 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 sex education focus on a narrow, stigma- and fear-based message about unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The problem with this approach is twofold: first, many parents 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 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 sexual health and wellness 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 by keeping sex ed out of schools.

At EducateUS, we work to develop 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 community health and culture change. This report builds on our foundational 2022 research, and is based on a set of tests we ran in Summer and Fall of 2023, 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

In these studies, we asked survey questions focused on action, not simply support. Specifically, we asked respondents to tell us how likely they were to vote for a pro-sex ed candidate in an upcoming election or share a pro sex-ed post on social media. We also asked perspective questions. For example, asking if folks agreed or disagreed that advancing sex ed in public schools was important to them or their level of concern about politicians restricting what kids learned in school.

Most respondents answered these questions after seeing one or more messages about sex education, while the placebo groups saw a neutral, non-political message – in this case, it was text from an ad for Morton salt. Because questions about likeliness to take action for sex ed 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.

Support for Pro-Sex-Ed Candidates Grew 7 Points Since 2022

We consistently found that even without being exposed to our messages, 52% of a nationwide sample of adults reported being either "likely" or "very likely" to vote for a candidate who openly supports sex education in public schools in upcoming elections. That's a 7% increase over our 2022 study findings. This is especially encouraging given that our sample 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, given that they are generally not likely to vote in the upcoming election. When we factor in that only 66% of voting-eligible Americans voted in the 2020 presidential election, we believe that a strong – and most importantly growing – majority of people who intend to vote are looking to vote for a pro-sex ed candidate this year.



People of Color Are Our Base

On average, people of color in our placebo groups reported being 14% more likely to take action for public school sex ed compared to their white counterparts, a finding consistent with our 2022 research. 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.

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](#).

Men No Longer Lag Behind Women in Sex Ed Support

One of the most interesting takeaways for this study is that we did not observe the gender gap in support for sex ed that we had in our 2022 research. We no longer see that women are unequivocally more likely than men to report that they will show up for sex ed. (We unfortunately still do not have access to samples with non-binary genders.) There are some differences in how men and women respond to specific messages. But overall, we found no meaningful gender gap in readiness to vote for a pro-sex-ed candidate.



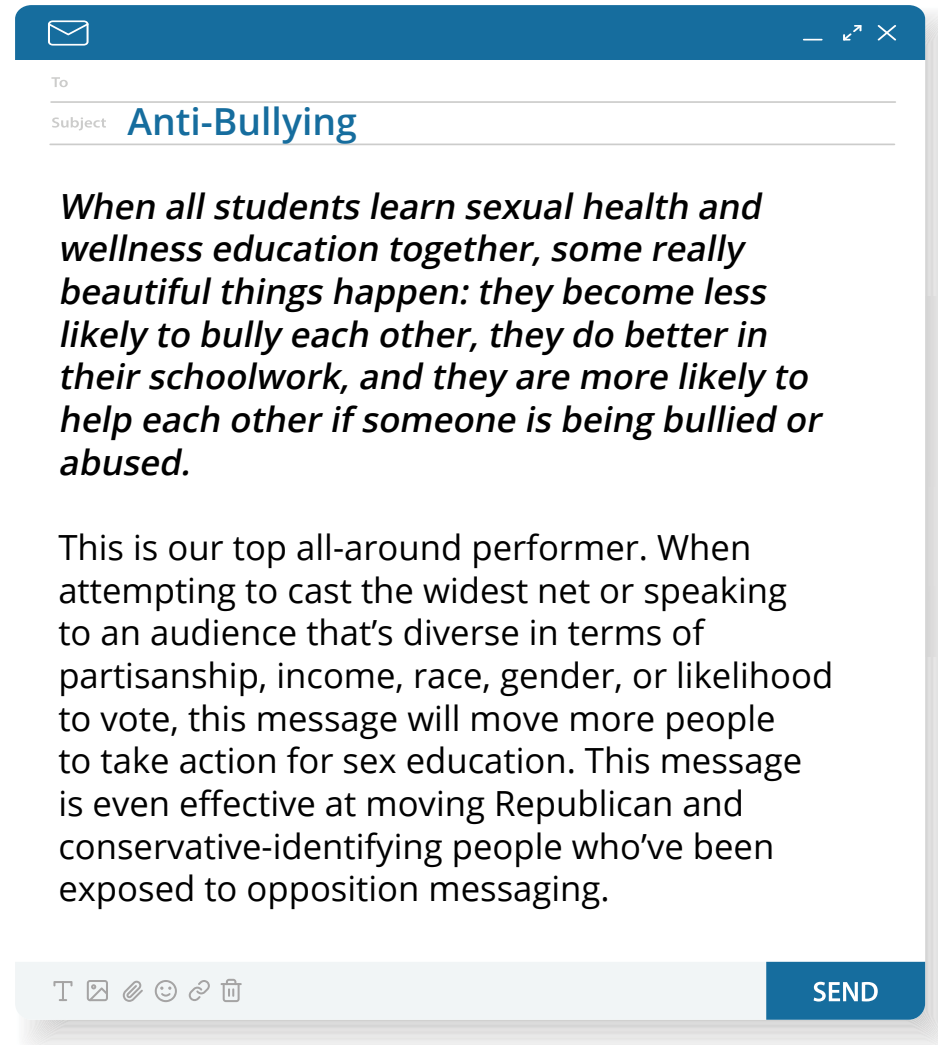
Use These Messages!


Below are our four most successful messages out of the 10 we tested. We tested each top message against two different opposition messages adapted directly from quotes from opposition leaders.

One was an “indoctrination” opposition message (arguing that sex ed is a tool for indoctrinating kids into “gender ideology”), and one was about “pornography” and “sexualization” (arguing that sex ed is “robbing children of their innocence”).

The good news: All four of our top messages consistently blunt the impact of the opposition's messages, and in some cases outperform opposition messages entirely. In addition to mobilizing those we consider our base (young people, people of color, Democrats, liberal-identifying folks, women, urban dwellers, etc.) we found particular success across a few unexpected demographic subgroups, which we note in the “Additional Messaging Guidance” section.

Here are the four effective messages you should use in your advocacy:








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To

Subject **Break the Isolation**

It's no secret that too many young people right now are lonely and having a tough time. No matter what communities we're a part of, I know we all want to support them. That's why I believe in teaching sexual health and wellness education in school. It's one of the best ways we have to help young people develop good, healthy connections with themselves and others.

This message is consistently successful on its own and in blunting the impact of opposition rhetoric. Rural dwellers, low-income folks, and low voter turnout groups are especially moved by it, perhaps related to the social barriers they face more often.

T      **SEND**






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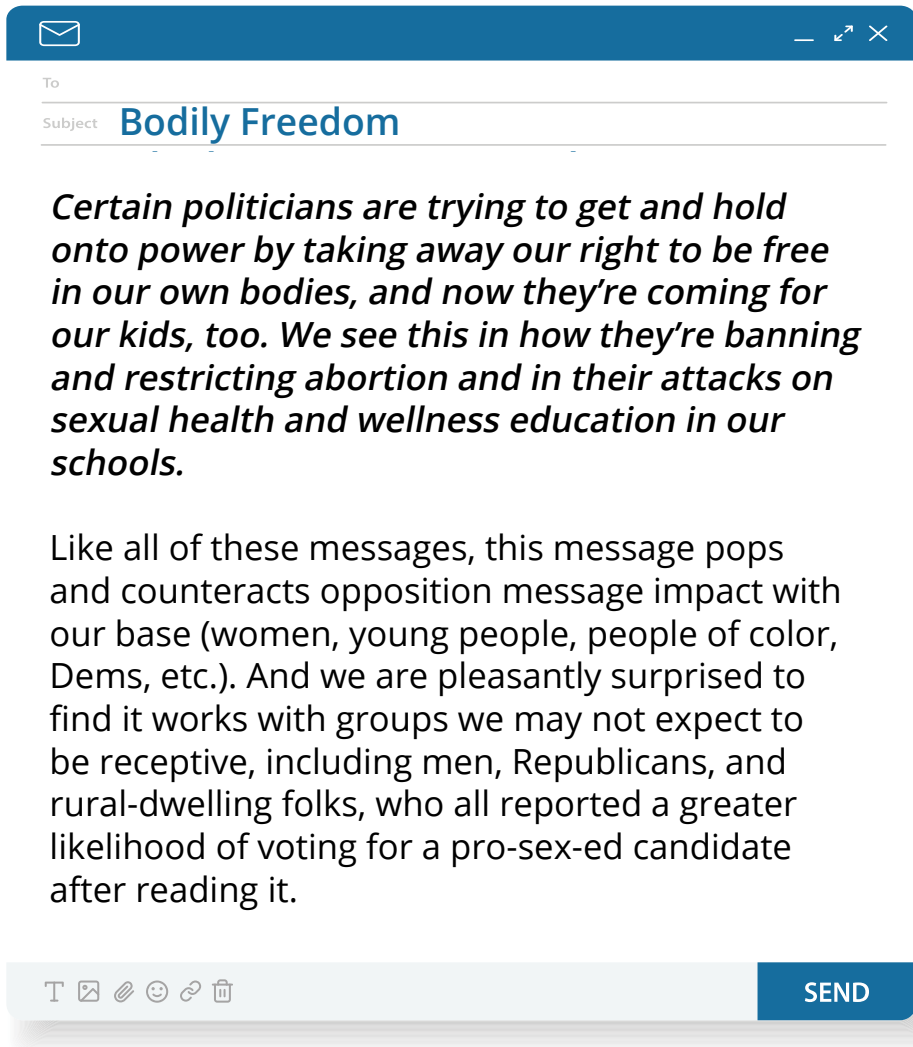
To

Subject **Protect Majority Rights**

Some politicians out there are trying to gain power by hurting our kids. They don't care about most parents or the well-being of our children. They're after money from their supporters, so they're trying to take away Black history for everyone, ban books, and stop schools from teaching about relationships and sexuality at all. They don't even care that parents can already let their own kids skip sex ed lessons if they want.

This is a shorter yet still-effective version of our top performer in our 2022 study. 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 a great message to use.

T      **SEND**



All four of these messages are effective (to varying degrees) both with subgroups that have a pre-existing high likelihood to act for sex ed and with subgroups that start with a lower propensity to take action for sex education. None of the four produce any notable backlash in any subgroup, so feel free to use them with homogenous as well as diverse audiences. If you would like to learn more about which of these messages are most impactful to use with a specific subgroup, please reach out to jfriedman@educateusaction.org.



Additional Messaging Guidance

Make Students and Parents the Star

As you can tell, our most successful messages feature students and parents at the center. In 2022, we tested two different messages centering teachers and schools, and in 2023 we iterated on a teacher-oriented message using guidance from on the ground, and each attempt failed. So keep your focus on students and parents.

Stories Over Talking Points

When you're crunched for time, these messages work great on their own. But whenever possible, use these messages to frame a personal story that relates to the theme of the message. Research is clear that when you tell a personal story that moves people emotionally, it's more effective than simply sticking to talking points.

For example, you might use our Anti-Bullying message this way:

When all students learn sexual health and wellness education together, some really beautiful things happen: they become less likely to bully each other, they do better in their schoolwork, and they are more likely to help each other if someone is being bullied or abused. That's why sex education

is so important to me. As someone who was bullied throughout her school years, I know how feeling afraid of my peers affected everything I experienced growing up, from my ability to make friends to my ability to concentrate on my schoolwork and even my ability to feel like I was fundamentally worthy of love. There are people trying to say keeping kids ignorant will keep them safe, but all it does is keep us afraid. It took me so long to heal from those wounds, and I never want another kid to have to go through what I did. I know you don't either. Together, if we support sexual health and wellness education, we can make school a place where kids learn to trust and grow and connect and learn, not to hide in fear.

Name What Our Opposition Is Doing

According to research conducted in 2023 by PerryUndem and the Center for Advancing Innovative Policy for Advocates for Youth and Red Wine and Blue, getting specific about what our opposition is doing or trying to do motivates our potential allies. List the things they are trying to ban and the impacts their policies will have on students. This finding is also borne out in studies on advocating for other progressive issues. Use plain language (skip the policy technicalities), get specific, and highlight the real-world impact on students.

Leave Off the Modifiers

In a 2017 study, Planned Parenthood found that any modifier you can use to specify what kind of sex education you're talking about is less effective than using no modifier at all. So "sex ed" is more effective than "comprehensive sex ed," "quality sex ed," "inclusive sex ed" or any other common modifier. In a 2023 study, Planned Parenthood found that the term "sex education", without any modifiers (like comprehensive or fact-based), is still the best term to use for most audiences. The one exception was elementary school audiences, where the best term to use is "sexual health and well-being education."

On Child Abuse Prevention

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



Move Beyond the Usual Audience:

Men, Conservatives and Non-Parents are Ready to be Persuaded

Men Like Our Messages

We repeatedly found men to be more receptive to all four of our top messages than women. They respond especially well to the anti-bullying message, but across the board, if men hear any of our messages (including some that didn't make our top 4), they are more likely to be persuaded than women. We hypothesize that this is because they have heard fewer pro-sex-ed messages, since "moms" are the traditional target for these kinds of messages. So there is likely more room for impact when men are addressed.

Don't Skip Conservatives

Our **Anti-Bullying** message is a powerful way to neutralize and even outperform opposition messages with self-identified conservatives, moving conservatives between 10 and 13 points toward voting for a pro-sex-ed candidates versus conservatives who only heard the

opposition message. 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, and in some cases, even moving them to support it. **Break the isolation, Protect majority rights,** and **Bodily freedom**, also significantly moved conservatives, though not as much as **Anti-Bullying**.

Non-Parents Are Receptive to Persuasion

While our baselines show that, pre-messaging, people who don't have kids under 18 at home are less ready to take action for sex ed than parents/guardians of kids under 18, the no-kids-at-home group is more likely than the parents group to be persuaded to take action when they read our our messages after seeing opposition messages. This is yet more evidence that we ignore non-parents at our peril. It's not only parents and students who can be persuaded to take action for sex education! After reading an opposition message followed by one of our top four messages, those without children at home were an average of 9 points more likely to report they would vote for a pro sex-ed candidate than those who saw opposition messaging alone. They need to hear from us.

Methodology



EducateUS conducted an iterative survey research approach, fielding six surveys between June and December, 2023 using the Grow Progress Rapid Message Test platform.

For each message test, GrowProgress used panel partnerships to recruit approximately 600 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. Subgroup analyses referenced in this report are only shared for those groups where the subgroup population sample was substantial enough to obtain a significant result.

After respondents answered the demographic questions and read the message(s) in the test, respondents were asked three “success questions” to gauge the hypothetical influence of the given message on willingness to take political action. All survey respondents were asked a question on vote choice:

*How likely are you to **vote for a candidate** who openly supports relationships and sexuality education in public schools in the upcoming November elections?*

Dependent on survey wave, we asked respondents an additional two questions related to civic engagement or their perspective on sexual health and wellness education, among the following listed:

- How likely are you to **share a social media post** in support of public school sexual health and wellness education?
- How likely are you to take action to support public school sexual health and wellness education, such as **contacting your elected representative?**
- **How important is a candidate’s position** on sexual health and wellness education when choosing who to vote for?
- How strongly do you agree with the following statement: **I am concerned** that politicians will restrict what my kids and the kids in my community learn in school.
- How strongly do you agree with the following statement: Advancing sexual health and wellness education in schools is **important to me.**

Informed by our 2022 survey results and intel from community and national organizations since disseminating results, in Summer 2023, we began by testing six revised or new long-form messages that adopted the “messaging architecture” of the Race Class Narrative. While we derived meaningful takeaways on vote likelihood, in particular, from these longform messages, we then opted to examine which specific sentiments could be considered as most impactful or moving to an engaged audience.

We proceeded by deconstructing our most successful 2022 and 2023 longform messages into ten “mini” messages conveying a single core component of the Race Class Narrative-based longform messages. We derived message success through comparisons between responses to the three success questions and responses to a non-political placebo message, in this case, a brief positive message about the company Morton Salt. We gauged success metrics across overall populations and demographic subgroup analyses. Four stand-out mini messages judged on success against the placebo message were chosen for further appraisal against opposition messaging tactics.

We then conducted a similar funneling approach and proceeded by testing the four most successful mini messages against three messages based on common anti-sex education rhetoric circulated by opposition groups, with language drawn directly from opposition leaders. We reference only two of those three tests in the results above because our first “anti-sexualization” opposition message had no significant impact on any of our subgroups, so we reformulated it, and the second version, which we include in our findings, significantly diminished readiness to take action for sex ed across the board (at least until participants read our pro-sex-ed messages).

For each of those survey instruments, we posed an opposition message before sharing an EducateUS message deemed to be meaningful through the precursory testing. Increased sample sizes were collected across the three final tests to improve our ability to discern a significant difference between the placebo

or opposition message. We also chose to increase the overall sample collection for increased inclusion of minority demographic groups, such as Black and Latino race subgroups.

Please email Jaclyn Friedman at jfriedman@educateusaction.org for details on opposition messages we tested, our own message writing and testing approach, or further specifics of the survey methodology.



Authors

This report was produced by EducateUS, based on research led by Monika Nayak, EducateUS Lead Researcher, and Jaclyn Friedman, EducateUS Founder & Executive Director

Next Steps

EducateUS is already hard at work planning our next round of message testing. If you have ideas you'd like us to consider for future message testing, 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 learning more about any of the messages we tested, or if you have questions on findings specific to any specific demographic subgroup. Reach out to EducateUS Founder & Executive Director, Jaclyn Friedman at jfriedman@educateusaction.org.

About EducateUS

EducateUS is a new kind of sex ed advocacy organization, building a movement of voters laser-focused on advancing progressive sex education policy and implementation across the country. We do this by organizing at the grassroots and grasstops, endorsing and supporting pro-sex-ed school board candidates, and via innovative narrative change work that is transforming the way people talk about and understand the issue of sex ed. We believe that universal public sex education can change the world. Join us at educateusaction.org and at [@educateusaction](https://www.instagram.com/educateusaction) on social media.

