

So You Want to Speak Up For Sex Education

A quickstart guide to speaking at school board meetings, public hearings, and more



We're so glad to hear you want to speak up for quality sexuality & relationships education at a public meeting!



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At EducateUS, we know that better public sex education will help us raise a new generation of Americans who are secure in their own boundaries; recognize and respect the basic humanity of their peers regardless of race, place, religion, class or gender; know all the essential facts about how bodies work; and are fully prepared to have stable, loving relationships with themselves and others.

In other words, improving public school sex and relationships education will help make every community stronger, happier, and healthier, and we're so glad to have you as part of the movement.

Even though they are in the minority in most places, opponents of sex ed have been making a big noise at school board and other public meetings lately, which is why making sure public officials hear from supporters of sex education is more important than it has ever been, and can make a real impact on what happens next in your community. That's why we've written this guide, with just the things you most need to know about how to make your moment count. If there's anything missing that you wish was here, please reach out to Jaclyn Friedman, EducateUS Founder & Executive Director, at jfriedman@educateusaction.org.

Best Practices

When making yourself heard at a public meeting, here are a few simple ideas that can make a big difference:

Get connected

Whenever possible, find out who's already organizing on this issue and see how you can join them. ([We've got a great tool for that on our website.](#)) If there's no one taking the lead yet, see if you can get some friends, colleagues or neighbors to come together to work out a plan. You will always make more of an impact if there are more of you speaking up together. And sometimes there are delicate negotiations happening behind the scenes, or other considerations that you can learn about in advance from folks who are already working on the issue.

Play by the rules

Our opposition is often aggressively disruptive, so let's make sure people can see the difference between us and them. Find out the rules of the meeting in advance – how do you sign up to speak? Who can speak? How long will you have? When will the public part of the meeting be? You can usually find a contact on the town or state website – just call or email to ask. And then plan well so you can stick to the rules. Many meetings limit public comments to 2-3 minutes, so it's smart to plan what you're going to say in advance to make the most of your time.

Claim your power

When you introduce yourself, be sure to say why people should listen to you. This can be as simple as “I have lived in this community for X years” or “My child is a student in this district.” Let people know you have something real at stake, and a connection to the community and the issue.

Share values, stories and emotions

Facts alone aren't enough. No matter how logical we think we are, the truth is that most people make big decisions based on how they feel. So share things that evoke emotions – tell a story about how your own sex ed failed you, for example, or an important question your kid asked you that you didn't know how to answer, or how you think things would be better if the people in power had good sex ed. Whatever you choose, focus on the values, stories and feelings that have led you to care so much about sex education.

Use the past to inspire the future

One powerful way to get people excited to support your vision for the future is to remind them of a time in the past when we've done something big together that maybe seemed impossible at the time. When you remind people that they rejected fear and came together to make their community better before, it seems more possible to do it again now.

Don't repeat a lie even to refute it

Study after study shows that repeating a lie - even if you're saying it's a lie - can actually help the lie take a deeper hold in people's minds. It's good to call out that lies and misinformation are being shared, but don't repeat anything that's actually untrue. So you might say “You have heard many lies here tonight. Here is the truth.” And then say what's true, and why you know it's true. (For some helpful facts, check out [this fact sheet from SIECUS](#) – though it's written to help pass a specific federal bill called REAHYA, a lot of the information on it may be useful to you.)

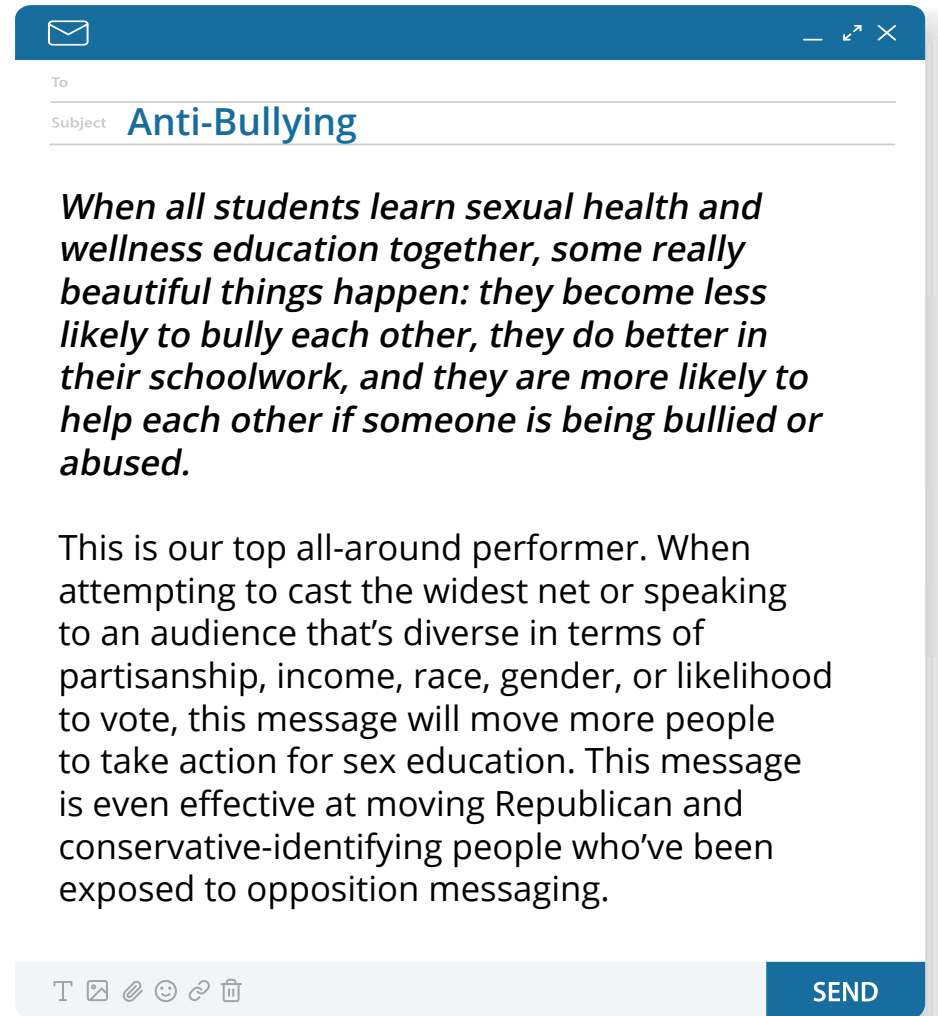
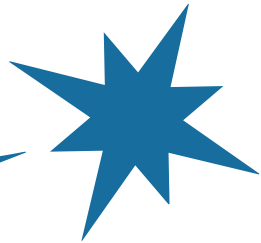
Repeat yourself


It's much more effective to repeat the same message several times than to try to cram as many ideas and arguments as you can into your allotted time or space. Pick a core message and repeat it over and over, and you'll leave the best impression. If you're part of a group that's speaking, you can amp up your impact by working together to make sure that you're all speaking on the same couple of ideas.

Sample Messages

Once you've got the basics down, it's time to figure out what you want to say. We've got you.

We've written some sample statements that you can use and make your own – consider them sketches or outlines. You should add to them all the stuff that's personal to you – your own stories, your own personal introduction, your own take on specific things that are happening where you live. Change up the wording, whatever you need to do. Use them in a way that makes sense for you.








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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.

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To

Subject **Bodily Freedom**

Certain politicians are trying to get and hold onto power by taking away our right to be free in our own bodies, and now they're coming for our kids, too. We see this in how they're banning and restricting abortion and in their attacks on sexual health and wellness education in our schools.

Like all of these messages, this message pops and counteracts opposition message impact with our base (women, young people, people of color, Dems, etc.). And we are pleasantly surprised to find it works with groups we may not expect to be receptive, including men, Republicans, and rural-dwelling folks, who all reported a greater likelihood of voting for a pro-sex-ed candidate after reading it.

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How to Make Your Own Message



You may want to say something different than the messages we've written for you. That's great! There are lots of issues and lots of different ways to talk about them.

We recommend also checking out [these messaging guides](#) written and tested by ASO Communications, on topics like Honesty in Education, Freedom to Learn, Transgender Youth and more.

But if you want to write something uniquely yours, here's an outline that will help you make your own message as powerful as possible. Just answer these five questions, and combine your answers to get your message.

What's the practical goal?

What action do you want people to take? Do you want the school board to vote a certain way? Want your neighbors to call their representatives? Want a bill passed favorably out of committee? Be specific.

What will happen if you win?

This is the time to dream big. What will be better about the world if enough people – or enough of the right people – take this action? Even if you're speaking because you want to stop something bad from happening, the most powerful thing you can do is share your vision of how your community will be better if your side wins. Who will be happier, safer, more whole? How will everyone win, even if they think they're not directly involved?

What's the unifying value at stake?

Our opposition loves to split us across our differences, whether they be race, gender, class, sexual orientation, rural/urban – they love to divide and conquer. Research has shown that the effective way to neutralize that strategy is to acknowledge our differences, and then name a powerful value we share despite those differences. For example, no matter our race or zip code, most of us can agree that school should be a place where every kid has an equal chance to thrive. Quality relationships and sexuality education delivers just that, with lessons on communication, consent, boundary-setting, respecting each other across differences, building healthy relationships, and making moral decisions that will last their whole lives.

Why are our opponents opposed?

Spoiler: it's almost always about using fear and misinformation to divide us so they can gain more power for themselves. Or because they want to impose their personal opinions on everyone, no matter who it hurts. It can feel hard to say things like that out loud sometimes, especially if there are opponents present! But it makes a real difference. Be sure to be specific: this isn't about blaming individual people who may have been taken in by opposition propaganda, it's about naming why certain people are creating and hyping the propaganda in the first place. The point is to draw a distinction between your values and motives and the values and motives of those who are driving the opposition, so that people who are undecided have a clear choice to make.

What else needs to be said?

Add whatever else you think needs to be added to give context and to convey all the relevant facts and urgency of the matter at hand.



Dealing With the Opposition



The opponents of sex education are well-funded and loud, but that doesn't mean they get to win.

They're using messages that make people feel powerful by using fear, confusion, and existing divisions in the community to pit an "us" versus a "them." That's why our strategy should always be to unify people across differences around a common value, and make our opposition the one and only "them" we're standing up to. Here are some things to keep in mind when facing organized opposition:

YOU ARE (PROBABLY) IN THE MAJORITY

Polls show that the vast majority of Americans support quality public school sex education. Even in lots of places that aren't considered "blue." Odds are good that wherever you live, lots of other people agree with you. They may just be too afraid to speak up about it. When you speak up, you may give them courage to join you.

YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO BE HEARD

Whether or not you're in the majority where you live, you have a stake in what happens in your community and you have the right to be heard. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

BRACE YOURSELF

That said, opponents of public school sex education often try to use personal insults and other scare tactics to shut us up. Yet another reason to not go it alone. When you are speaking up with other people, you can have each others' backs if the opposition gets nasty. If you don't have anyone to go with, at least let some friends and loved ones know what you plan to do and that you may need a little extra care afterward. And it's not a bad idea to **level up your online security**, too.

GET FAMILIAR WITH THEIR ARGUMENTS BEFOREHAND

If possible, see if you can find examples of what the opposition in your community is saying. Being prepared will mean you're less shocked in the moment, and also more ready to show why they're wrong. For example, if you know they're going to argue that parents have the right to control sex education, you can be ready to ask, which parents? Why do those few parents think they have the right to control what every child in school learns?

DON'T FOCUS ON THEM

That said, don't spend too much of your energy focused on what they're doing. It's going to make a bigger impact if you get across your positive vision and values. You're not there to debate the opposition. You're there to present a better alternative to them.

NAME THAT THEY'RE LYING, BUT DON'T REPEAT THE LIES

Yes, we said this already, but we also said it was important to repeat your message! So we're repeating this one here: never repeat a lie, even to refute it.

KNOW THE RULES, RECORD VIOLATIONS

If possible, learn the rules of the meeting you're attending ahead of time, so you can insist on them being applied equally to everyone. If they're not, take notes on how the rules are being bent or broken, and who is in charge. It may be possible to file a complaint after or to give this information to a friendly reporter.



Opposition Glossary

Our opposition likes to use a lot of buzzwords! Their language can get very confusing — which is the point.

They use these words and phrases to hide their real agenda. We've decoded some of the most common ones for you here:

Critical Race Theory

This is **a real theory**, but it's not taught in K-12 schools. Instead, opponents use this term to make white parents afraid that teaching honest American history will hurt their children – which is not true, though not teaching it DOES harm children of color.

Critical Social Justice

Like Critical Race Theory, this is another case where the name of a real theory is being used as a scare tactic to undermine public schools. Our opposition uses it to chip away at any efforts towards creating a fair and inclusive community, especially through the school system.

Curriculum transparency

This phrase refers to opposition efforts to break public schools by insisting that literally every last word and idea taught in the classroom be made available to the public in advance, putting an impossible burden on schools and teachers who are already underfunded and overburdened. The people pushing this strategy are often supporters of taking public tax money that's meant to fund public schools and giving it to parents so they can use it to send their kids to private schools.

Divisive concepts

Concepts related to race or sex

It's impossible to learn and grow without being uncomfortable sometimes, but our opponents still want to prevent their kids from ever feeling awkward. Efforts to ban "divisive concepts" also put extra stress on already stressed-out teachers who are confused about what they can or can't teach students.

Experimentation

Our opposition uses this term to create fear and panic around medically proven, often lifesaving gender-affirming health care.

<p>Objectionable material</p> <p>Obscene material</p> <p>Sensitive materials</p> <p>Explicit content</p>	<p>According to our opposition, this could include anything at all related to sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity or even the names of body parts. They use these terms to spread panic about sex education and impose their individual personal beliefs on every student in every school.</p>
<p>On the basis of biological sex</p>	<p>Our opposition loves to use this phrase to pretend transgender kids don't exist and block them from having basic rights to education and health care.</p>
<p>Parents Bill of Rights</p> <p>Parental involvement</p> <p>Parental review</p> <p>Parental objection</p>	<p>Our opposition uses these phrases when they want to impose their personal opinions on everyone else's children, without regard to the rights of the other parents of children in the school, let alone the rights of the children themselves.</p>

<p>Political indoctrination</p>	<p>This is what the opposition calls things like teaching kids about the experiences and lives of people of a variety of races, genders and sexual orientations, and other topics that are important for students to learn about so that they can be better prepared to work with and make friends with all kinds of people.</p>
<p>Pornographication</p> <p>Pornographize</p> <p>Sexualize</p>	<p>Our opposition claims that everything taught in medically accurate and age appropriate sexuality and relationships classes are one of these, from the proper names of body parts to explanations of consent to descriptions of how students can protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections.</p>
<p>Revisionist History</p>	<p>The opposition acts like it's opposite day when they try to apply this phrase to accurate discussions of America's history of slavery, segregation, and discrimination.</p>

Right to opt in**Require prior written parental consent****Shifting to an “opt-in” policy**

for sex education means parents have to sign a permission slip or otherwise actively agree before their kids can learn what they need to know. Whether because a parent is busy and forgets to fill out the form in time, or a child hides or forgets about the form, opt-in policies make it impossible for some students to get the education they need even when their parents want them to. Parents already have the right to deny their kids sex ed by using existing opt-out laws.

Youth Protection Act**Vulnerable Youth Act**

Beware of policies or proposed rules with names like these! Sometimes these bills are, in fact, trying to harm young people by preventing them from getting gender-affirming care from responsible doctors and nurses. These terms are also used to allow kids to be forced into incredibly harmful “conversion therapy” programs, which have been condemned by the American Psychological Association.





THANK YOU!

Thanks again for your willingness to speak up for quality sex and relationships education. In the end, everything in this guide is just details - the most important part is that you speak up in your own voice for what you believe in. We are so grateful to be standing with you. If we can be of use, or if you want to let us know how it went, please write to us at jfriedman@educateusaction.org.

And be sure to [**sign up for our email list**](#) so we can keep in touch!