Sexual Education for Youth

Requiring public schools teaching sex education to use a comprehensive, medically accurate, research-informed, and age-appropriate curriculum.

Ione Hughes ’19
Katherine Laemmle ’20

The importance of exposing youth to the topics of age-appropriate sexual education and healthy relationships cannot be overstated. Sex education should be comprehensive, and cover topics of consent and sexual assault and harassment, pregnancy prevention, and ways to avoid sexually transmitted diseases and infections. Comprehensive sex education is about more than just sexual activity - it covers how to have healthy, functioning relationships. It gives young people the tools they need to tackle the confusing world of relationships, sex, and more. Sexual education should teach the benefits of abstinence and delaying sexual activity in conjunction with the importance of using various methods of contraception to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections; teach young people the skills to implement these safe sex practices; and help students to develop relationship and communication skills to form healthy relationships free of violence or coercion, and to make informed decisions about their own relationships and sexuality. This education should be inclusive and appropriate for students regardless of gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status.

The Bill
S.263 An Act relative to healthy youth

Elevator Speech

Our names are Katharine and Ione and we are both students at Brandeis University. Everyone should have the opportunity to thrive in healthy, consenting relationships. To ensure that this opportunity is available to everyone, it is vital that we better educate young people about consent and healthy relationships. National Research reveals that 1 in 3 teens report knowing friends or peers who have experienced dating abuse. Additionally, the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey reveals that 1 in 10 teens report being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner. As female college students in Massachusetts, we are very concerned by this. Comprehensive sex education programs will address these alarming statistics by teaching students to understand the words “YES” and “NO” and respect the boundaries of their peers.
These skills will enable students to engage in healthy, consenting relationships. The Healthy Youth Act addresses this issue by ensuring that Massachusetts schools that offer sex education are teaching comprehensive, age-appropriate, and medically-accurate information.

We urge you to hold a hearing immediately and vote The Healthy Youth Act out favorably.

**Excerpts from Storybook**

“No one should have to say #metoo. Especially young people.”
– Planned Parenthood

“If children are going to grow up to have agency and make their own choices, they need complete and correct information.” – Keridwen Luis, Professor at Brandeis University

“I feel like I wasn’t prepared at all.” – student

“People think [sex education] is the responsibility of the parents, but it is hard for parents to deal with” – Keridwen Luis, Professor at Brandeis University

Prof. Luis responds to opponents of the bill who believe that comprehensive sex education will lead adolescents to have sex earlier by stating that “there is no evidence that comprehensive sex ed. leads to earlier sex” and that “there is really good evidence that abstinence only sex ed. leads to unsafe sex.”

**Op-Ed**

**Ione**

*An Act Relative to Healthy Youth*

The #MeToo movement shocked millions around the world with its depth and breadth, but for many, the alarmingly low levels of knowledge about the concept of consent is no surprise. The result – cases of sexual assault – shouldn't be a surprise either. As a female college student in Massachusetts, I have been extremely concerned by the lack of information provided to myself and to my peers throughout our education. The numbers of survivors experiencing sexual assault each year are not just statistics. These numbers are my friends, my peers - and myself. And these numbers are not going down. As a student orientation leader at Brandeis, I’ve seen firsthand the knowledge of consent that students enter college with. This knowledge is not comprehensive, nor is it always medically-accurate.

I am a student at Brandeis University and a resident of Waltham, Massachusetts. I strongly believe that every individual should be provided with the opportunity to thrive in healthy, consenting relationships. I think that we all value this opportunity as residents and members of the community of Massachusetts. To ensure that this opportunity is available to every individual in the Commonwealth, it is absolutely vital that we begin to better educate our young people about consent and healthy relationships.

Currently in Massachusetts, there is no requirement for schools that offer sex education to discuss healthy relationships or consent in their curriculum. These schools are not covering a variety of essential topics, including affirmative and voluntary consent, how to engage in healthy relationships and dating practices, avoidance of STIs and unintended pregnancy, and more. These missing components in many sex education curricula are costing our community by raising uninformed future adults and increasing the state’s healthcare spending on medical concerns that could easily be prevented with comprehensive sex education. Comprehensive sex education has been shown to help youth delay sexual activity until later in life, reduce numbers of sexual partners, and increase condom and contraceptive use - all of which help limit the risk of transmission of STIs and unintended pregnancy. In a study of comprehensive sex education programs, it was shown that 40% of participants delayed sexual initiation, reduced their numbers of sexual partners, or increased contraceptive use; and 60% reduced unprotected sex. Adolescents are the most at-risk for transmission of STIs, and thus the most in-need of comprehensive, age-appropriate, and medically accurate sex education.

Given our state’s proud history of progressive legislation that aims to protect and empower our citizens, it stands to reason that we would support a bill that would reduce instances of sexual assault by educating Massachusetts youth about healthy, consensual relationships. According to Planned Parenthood, “We can combat sexual assault at its roots by teaching young people how to build healthy, respectful relationships.” The #MeToo movement was a nationwide wake-up call - and Massachusetts needs to be at the forefront of vital changes to ensure that nobody has to say “me too,” ever again.

Experts agree that comprehensive sex education is the best way to ensure that adolescents have the knowledge necessary to engage in healthy, consenting relationships. The Healthy Youth Act works toward the goal of providing members of the community of Massachusetts with the resources they need to lead healthy lives by ensuring that schools that offer sex education are teaching comprehensive, age-appropriate, and medically-accurate information.

As members of the Commonwealth, we all understand the importance of properly educating young people about how to grow up and engage in healthy, consenting relationships. I would like to strongly urge everyone reading this to take
action: call your Senators and Representatives and encourage them to hold a hearing immediately and vote The Healthy Youth Act out favorably. People on the other side of this issue - people who feel as if LGBTQ+ individuals don’t deserve equal rights, people who believe our children are better left uneducated and uninformed about vital topics such as consent - have already taken action against this bill. If we want to have any hope of passing this important legislation, for the good of our children and the future of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, we must also take action.

Katherine

Why is Consent Still a Dirty Word?

As spring begins, high school seniors are thinking about leaving home for college, attending prom, and savoring the time they have left with their friends. For students, senior spring is a carefree time to celebrate the past four years and look forward to the next four. For educators, however, senior spring is a high-stakes time to make sure that they have provided their students with the tools they need to succeed in the next stage of their lives. If Massachusetts does not give schools and teachers the tools they need to provide comprehensive sex education, the safety and wellbeing of our state’s students is at stake. An Act relative to healthy youth will ensure that educators have done everything their power to protect their students by requiring sex education to be comprehensive, medically-accurate, and age-appropriate. The Healthy Youth Act will equip optimistic high school seniors with the knowledge they need to learn and explore their interests safely during the college years that lie ahead.

The goal of a K-12 education in the United States is to prepare students to become contributing members of society. With the years students spend studying fractions, photosynthesis, George Washington, and conjunctions, shouldn’t they spend a few hours here and there learning some practical skills? While there is no doubt that students should learn about these topics, it is also undeniable that there are very few life-threatening situations in which reciting “In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue,” would lead to safety. There are, however, many life-threatening situations in which comprehensive sex education would lead to safety.

Keridwen Luis, Professor of Women and Gender Studies at Brandeis University, believes that giving students the vocabulary to understand sex through comprehensive sex education is the best way to protect them. According to Jane Doe Inc, there is currently no requirement that sex education in Massachusetts schools be inclusive of the group most at-risk of experiencing teen dating violence—Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) students. The Human Rights Campaign reveals that 42.8 percent of LGB adolescents, compared to 29 percent of heterosexual adolescents, reported being physically abused by a dating partner. Additionally, 23.3 percent of LGB adolescents, compared to 12.3 percent of heterosexual adolescents, reported experiencing sexual victimization. Lastly, the most shocking statistics are on transgender youth, 88.9 percent of whom reported experiencing physical dating violence. Comprehensive sex education will ensure that LGBTQ students know what options and resources are available to them when they need help. Teaching students to understand complicated vocabulary words will help them score perfectly on the verbal section of the SATs while teaching them to understand the words “YES” and “NO” will help them respect the boundaries of others. Public schools in Massachusetts must focus as much on ensuring that students can lead healthy lives in college as they do on ensuring that students can earn a high GPA in college.

Opponents of the Healthy Youth Act often use two arguments to make their case that this bill should not pass. One is that teaching students about sex will cause them to have sex at an earlier age and to have unsafe sex more often. This argument, however, is just as logical as an argument that teaching kids about how heat, fuel, and oxygen create flames will cause them to become arsonists. Studies, Planned Parenthood reports, contradict this argument by suggesting that comprehensive sex education delays the age that adolescents first have sex as well as lowers rates of teen pregnancy and STIs. Another common argument that opponents of this bill use is that sex education is the job of parents, not schools. They believe that parents should be able to decide when and what their children learn about sex. This argument is similar to the argument against teaching evolution in public schools. Both encourage schools to deny their students access to information. We long ago shut down the debate about teaching evolution in Massachusetts public schools because our state values spreading access to information rather than sequestering it. Why, then, should students be entitled to learn about the evolution of the universe but not the evolution of their bodies?

High school seniors need comprehensive sex education to succeed in college and become contributing members of society. We must stop treating consent as a dirty word and instead treat it as a core topic, like fractions or photosynthesis, that schools must teach their students. I urge you to protect the future of optimistic high school seniors by contacting your local Massachusetts representative to let them know you support the bill and contacting the Committee on Education to encourage them to vote the bill out favorably. Additionally, you can help by volunteering with an organization, like Planned Parenthood or Jane Doe, that supports the bill. Calling your local Massachusetts representative to let them know you support the bill and contacting the Committee on Education to encourage them to vote the bill out favorably. Additionally, you can help by volunteering with an organization, like Planned Parenthood or Jane Doe, that supports the bill, sharing your own sex education experiences, and educating the young people in your lives about healthy relationships.
House Ways & Means Script

Dear Mr. Michlewitz,

Our names are Ione and Katharine and we are both residents of Waltham, MA. We strongly believe that everyone should have the opportunity to thrive in healthy, consenting relationships. To ensure that this opportunity is available to every individual in the Commonwealth, it is absolutely vital that we better educate our young people about consent and healthy relationships. Your political track record indicates your understanding that investing in education is investing in the future. S.263 shares many of the same goals as other bills you sponsor, such as H.576. Both seek to ensure that students have the resources they need to succeed in school. Although these goals will cost money to achieve, the long-term benefits of providing future generations with the tools they need to lead educated and productive lives will make the investment well worth it.

National Research reveals that 1 in 3 teens report knowing friends or peers who have experienced dating abuse. Additionally, the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey reveals that 1 in 10 teens report being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner. As female college students in Massachusetts, we are very concerned by these statistics. Comprehensive sex education programs will address these alarming statistics by teaching students to understand the words “YES” and “NO” and respect the boundaries of their peers. Schools that do offer sex education are doing a poor job. They are not covering a variety of vital topics including affirmative and voluntary consent, how to engage in healthy relationships and dating practices, avoidance of STIs and unintended pregnancy, and more. This missing component in many sex education curricula is costing our community by raising uninformed future adults and increasing the state’s healthcare spending on medical concerns that could have been prevented with comprehensive sex education. Sex education in Massachusetts must be regulated so that it is age-appropriate, medically accurate, and covers consensual sexual activity and relationships in a manner that is inclusive of all youth.

Age-appropriate, comprehensive sex education is the best way to ensure that adolescents have the knowledge necessary to engage in healthy, consenting relationships. Your bill sponsoring history indicates your commitment to providing members of the Massachusetts community with the resources they need to lead productive and informed lives in a cost-effective manner. The Healthy Youth Act works toward the same goal by ensuring that Massachusetts schools that offer sex education teach comprehensive, age-appropriate, and medically-accurate information without requiring an unreasonable increase in spending.

This bill is a long-term investment. It will ensure that schools equip students with the knowledge they need to become educated citizens that contribute to the community. Bills you sponsor indicate your commitment to providing students with comprehensive and accurate knowledge. Without An Act concerning genocide education, which you cosponsored, schools would not be required to teach students about the Holocaust and genocide. Similarly, without S.263, schools with sex education are not required to teach students about engaging in healthy, consensual relationships. An understanding of all of these topics is necessary to become an informed and productive member of the Massachusetts community.

The spending required for this bill will reduce the state’s spending in other areas, such as healthcare. Comprehensive sexual education has been shown to help youth delay sexual activity until later in life, reduce numbers of sexual partners, and increase condom and contraceptive use - all of which help limit the risk of transmission of STIs and unintended pregnancy. In a study of comprehensive sex education programs, it was shown that 40% of participants delayed sexual initiation, reduced their numbers of sexual partners, or increased contraceptive use; and 60% reduced unprotected sex. Adolescents are the most at-risk for transmission of STIs, and thus the most in-need of comprehensive, age-appropriate, and medically accurate sex education. The cost of implementing this bill, therefore, will reduce the state’s healthcare-related spending, as fewer adolescents will require medical treatment for STIs and unintended pregnancy.

There has been no pushback from Massachusetts schools based on the financial implications of the bill. There is a free curriculum available to teachers that is age-appropriate, medically accurate, and covers all the vital points of the issue. This bill does not mandate implement sexual education in schools. The bill would affect only those school districts that have already integrated sex education into their curriculum. The highest costs associated with education funding would likely be training teachers on how to properly teach the new comprehensive curriculum. The Massachusetts Teachers Association has vetted the bill and does not believe that the financial implications of this bill would be a barrier to its passing.

Governor Baker has set aside $1 million to fund the Healthy Relationships Grant Program in his budget proposal for the fiscal year of 2020. A percentage of this proposed budget would go towards funding comprehensive sex education in Massachusetts schools. While there would be costs associated with passing this bill through the legislature, Governor Baker agrees that this type of education is vital for ensuring the health and safety of our young people, and thus for the future of all those who reside in the Commonwealth.
Opponents of the bill argue that teaching students about sex will cause them to have sex at an earlier age and to have unsafe sex more often. Studies, however, contradict this argument by suggesting that comprehensive sex education delays the age that adolescents first have sex as well as lowers rates of teen pregnancy and STIs.

As residents of Massachusetts who, as we all should, have a vested interest in this bill, we ask that you ensure that S.263 is provided with the funding it needs to be successful in providing much needed comprehensive sex education for the Commonwealth. It is absolutely vital that this legislation is passed by the Massachusetts legislature and is well-funded. As the Chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, the fate of the Healthy Youth Act lies in your hands - and we implore you to give it the deference it deserves, so that the youth of Massachusetts will have equal access to the skills and opportunities they need to engage in safe, consensual, and healthy relationships with their peers.

Letter to the Legislator

Our names are Katharine and Ione and we are both residents of Waltham, MA. We strongly believe that everyone should have the opportunity to thrive in healthy, consenting relationships. To ensure that this opportunity is available to every individual in the Commonwealth, it is absolutely vital that we better educate our young people about consent and healthy relationships.

National Research reveals that 1 in 3 teens report knowing friends or peers who have experienced dating abuse. Additionally, the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey reveals that 1 in 10 teens report being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner. As female college students in Massachusetts, we are very concerned by these statistics. Comprehensive sex education programs will address these alarming statistics by teaching students to understand the words “YES” and “NO” and respect the boundaries of their peers. Given your history of presenting bills that have extended the statute of limitations for certain sexual abuse crimes, we are confident that you will also support this bill that would reduce instances of sexual assault by educating Massachusetts youth about healthy, consensual relationships.

Age appropriate comprehensive sex education is the best way to ensure that adolescents have the knowledge necessary to engage in healthy, consenting relationships. You have a proven record of providing members of the Massachusetts community with the resources they need to lead healthy lives. S.263 furthers that goal by ensuring that Massachusetts schools that offer sex education are teaching comprehensive, age-appropriate, and medically-accurate information.

Opponents of the bill argue that teaching students about sex will cause them to have sex at an earlier age and to have unsafe sex more often. Studies, however, contradict this argument by suggesting that comprehensive sex education delays the age that adolescents first have sex as well as lowers rates of teen pregnancy and STIs.

As a father of five children, you understand the importance of properly educating young people about how to grow up and engage in positive, healthy, mutually respectful relationships. We strongly urge you to hold a hearing immediately and vote The Healthy Youth Act out favorably, for the good of our children and the future of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

All our best,
Katharine & Ione

Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Ione

On meeting with Senator O’Connell’s aide

We met with her in an attempt to both advocate for our bill and discuss why we felt that the Healthy Relationships line-item should be fully funded to the best of the state’s abilities. For the most part, all of the meetings that we had had previously had seemed very favorable for us. Every senator, House member, or aide to one of these representatives had seemed very on board with our mission and had essentially assured us that they were either in support of our bill or were a declared co-sponsor of the bill.

The aide to Senator O’Connell was the first one who did not immediately assure us that she was in support of us. She offered some ... words of support, but followed those up with the fact that she and the Senator had received a multitude of phone calls from constituents arguing against passing the Healthy Youth Act. We immediately inquired as to what their main complaints were with regard to the proposed legislation. The aide informed us that the majority of parents or guardians were disillusioned with the idea of having to “opt-out” of sexual education, rather than “opt-in.” Apparently in the senator’s more conservative districts of Massachusetts, the requirement is that you must opt-in to sexual education for your children, rather than opt-out.

We attempted to give her our arguments to this specific issue, which she appeared to agree with - but we left the meeting with her still saying that she (and the senator) could not fully support our bill so long as their constituents continued to be unhappy with it. While this was frustrating, it was understandable. She wanted to make us happy, but since we were not residents of Senator O’Connell’s district, she could not reasonably offer us exactly what we wanted so long as their actual constituents were not on board. That being said, she did let us know that if the bill did make it to the floor for a vote, it was very likely that Senator O’Connell would vote in favor of it – so hopefully that will be enough.
Katherine

*On meeting with Molly from REACH Beyond Domestic Violence*

Speaking with Molly was very insightful. She shared a lot of information with me about why comprehensive sex education is so important. One reason she gave was that comprehensive sex education is in line with the whole child approach to education. I had never heard of this approach so it was great to have a new piece of evidence to use in support of the Healthy Youth Act. The conversation was also a great opportunity for me to share my knowledge about the bill. Molly had a lot of questions about it so I told her what the bill would do, the advocacy efforts I have been working on, and what she could do to help. Something that I could have done better during this meeting is asking Molly more about her connections to other coalitions in support of the bill.

**Update**

A hearing was held on May 24th and there appeared to be strong support, with Representative O’Day of the Education Committee saying, “I think this is a bill whose time, absolutely, has come.” A decision has yet to be made on the bill.

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**For more information**

*View the bill (MA legislature website):*
S.263: https://malegislature.gov/Bills/191/S263  
H. 410: https://malegislature.gov/Bills/191/h410

*Organization or Coalition support:*
Planned Parenthood Action Fund:  
www.istandwithplannedparenthood.org