

Sex Education Options In Wisconsin Public Schools



Wisconsin recently enacted the “Healthy Youth Act” (2009 Wisconsin Act 134), which establishes new requirements for human growth and development (sex education) instruction in Wisconsin’s public schools (nonpublic schools remain unaffected by this law). While sex education is not mandatory in Wisconsin public schools, school districts that choose to provide human growth and development instruction must now offer instruction on several newly required subjects, such as contraceptive use. To aid parents, guardians, students, and others, the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, the public policy voice of Wisconsin’s bishops, has prepared the following Q&A outlining what is and is not permitted under the new law.

Q. How is sex education in public schools different under the new law?

- A.** The law now mandates that “human growth and development” instruction in public schools provide “comprehensive” sex education. Prior to the law’s enactment, school districts had the freedom to offer instruction in comprehensive sex education, abstinence-based education, or both. Now, abstinence-based education (which does not discuss the “benefits” of contraceptive use) does not meet the new requirements and cannot be offered as human growth and development instruction.

It is important to note that schools may continue to offer abstinence-based education in other elective coursework as the new requirements only apply to courses labeled “human growth and development.”

Q. What subject matter must human growth and development instruction now include?

- A.** Previously, if a school district offered instruction on topics related to human sexuality, reproduction, or family planning, there also had to be instruction on marriage, parental responsibility, and on abstinence as the preferred choice of behavior prior to marriage and as the most effective way to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Under the new law, human growth and development instruction must include medically accurate and age appropriate information on all of the following subjects:

- the importance of communication about sexuality and decision making between a student and a student’s parents, guardians, or other family members
- reproductive and sexual anatomy and physiology, including biological, psychosocial, and emotional changes that accompany maturation
- puberty, pregnancy, parenting, body image, and gender stereotypes
- the skills needed to make responsible decisions about sexuality and sexual behavior
- the benefits of, and reasons for, abstaining from sexual activity, emphasizing the value of abstinence as the most reliable way to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections
- the health benefits, side effects, and proper use of contraceptives
- methods for developing healthy life skills
- how alcohol and drug use affect responsible decision making
- the impact of the media and one’s peers on thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to sexuality
- promotion of self-esteem and positive interpersonal skills, with an emphasis on healthy relationships, including friendships, marriage, and romantic and familial relationships
- counseling, medical, and legal resources for survivors of sexual abuse and assault

- information on the criminal penalties for engaging in sexual activities with a child and review of the sex offender registration requirements under current law

In addition, human growth and development instructional methods and materials may not promote bias against pupils of any race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnic or cultural background, or children with disabilities. Nor can instruction be biased against sexually active students.

Q. Does a student have to participate in human growth and development courses?

- A. No. Students can continue to opt out of instruction in these courses. To opt-out, a student’s parent or guardian must submit a written request to the school that the student be excused from participating.

Q. Why, as a Catholic, should I be concerned about what my school district is offering?

- A. Under the new law, human growth and development instruction must promote the health benefits and proper use of contraception and cannot show bias against sexually active students. This approach may confuse children whose parents teach them that such activity is inappropriate. Abstinence-based programs, though secular, are generally consistent with the teachings of the Church on the positive gifts of sexuality and its role within marriage. Instruction focuses on the skills and strategies necessary to ensure the healthiest outcomes for students. It promotes self-respect, character development, positive relationships, and marriage and family, while providing information on sexually transmitted infections, the effects of pornography and the media, resisting peer pressure, and the limitations of contraceptives (including potential abortifacient effects).

Q. How can I learn what my local public school is providing in terms of sex education?

- A. Contact your school district or school. Parents and guardians must be allowed to review the human growth and development instructional materials at any time, including prior to their use in the classroom.

Q. Can parents and members of the community help develop sex education curricula for schools?

- A. The law continues to require that each school district consult a local advisory committee comprised of parents, teachers, school administrators, students, health care professionals, clergy, and other community members, to assist the district with the development, review, and implementation of human growth and development curricula. However, any recommendations made by the committee must now meet the new state requirements. These committees also often provide input on whether a school district should provide sex education at all, and whether a school should offer a different course that is not called “human growth and development” as an elective.

Q. Who may be an instructor in human growth and development?

- A. Professional education staff and volunteer health care providers can provide instruction. Previously, volunteer health care providers could not provide instruction on a number of subjects, including human sexuality, reproduction, and family planning. This bar was eliminated under the new law. Now volunteers, including those from outside organizations, may provide instruction on these topics to students. Parents may want to inquire as to who provides instruction at their local school.

Q. Where can I learn more about the Catholic approach to human sexuality and abstinence?

- A. Contact your diocesan office for family life or visit *The Parent’s Place* website at (http://www.dioceseoflacrosse.com/ministry_resources/family_life/parentsplace/loveandlife.htm).