



## **OUT Maine Youth Policy Board Research Summary**

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**Background:** OUT Maine's Youth Policy Board consists of seven students from Knox and Waldo counties. These students met seven times throughout the school year to form community and connection between LGBTQ+ youth across the midcoast, choose and research a topic, and use their findings to outline policy recommendations.

**Topic:** The policy board decided to focus on youth mental health. The youth in YPB believe that access to sex education that includes accurate information about gender identity and sexuality is crucial to mental health for LGBTQ+ youth and their allied peers. The students in YPB believe that current sex education curricula in their high schools are not adequate and need to be informed by LGBTQ+ youth and current research. OUT Maine's YPB believes that an improvement in sex education curricula would lead to a more inclusive school climate - one in which LGBTQ+ youth feel welcomed and celebrated and have an ability to develop closer relationships with their peers and adult staff members, improving their overall mental health.

### **Research**

**Personal Experience and Preliminary Research:** Youth Policy Board members reached out to their school nurses, health teachers, and administrators to gather sex-ed curricula as preliminary research. The group discussed their findings and shared their own experiences in sex education classes. The group decided to create a survey to see what their peers learned from their sex education classes.

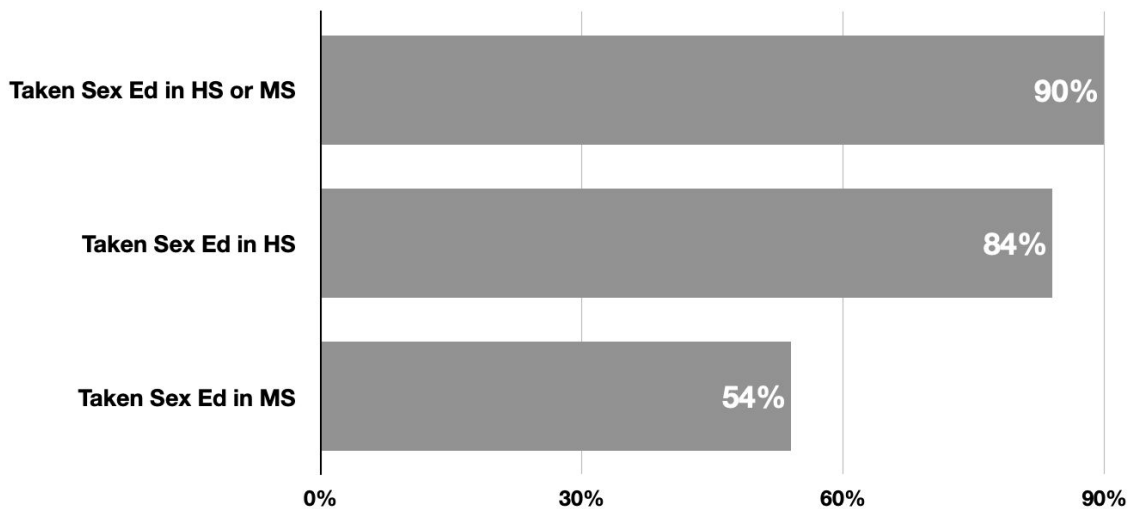
Through conversations with Maine Family Planning and their own research, the YPB members found that the Department of Education does not determine sex education curricula in schools. School districts set their own standards for sex education curricula.

**Student Survey:** The Youth Policy Board designed and sent out a survey assessing sex education curricula to students at each board member's school. In total, the survey



collected 146 responses from students at Belfast Area High School, Camden Hills Regional High School, Mount View High School, and Oceanside High School.

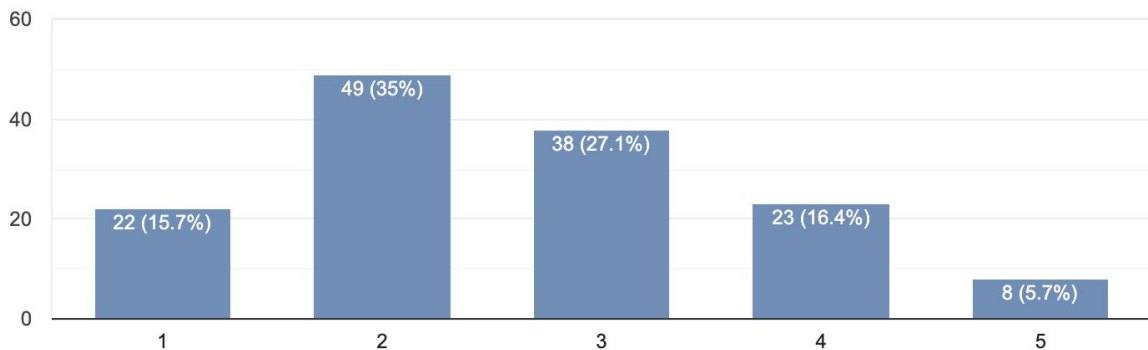
Out of 146 survey participants, 90% responded that they had taken a sex ed class before. Of those who had taken sex ed, 84% indicated that they had taken sex ed in middle school, and 56% had taken sex ed in high school.



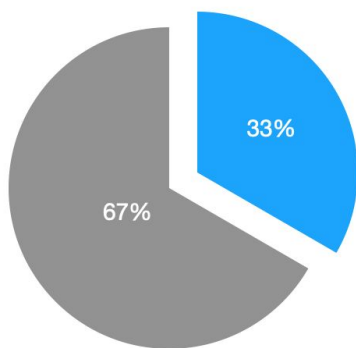
The survey asked students about their experiences with sex education in school, and addressed a number of topics such as sexual orientation and gender identity, healthy relationships, sexual assault, and safer sex. One question asked students, “On a scale from 1 to 5, how much have you learned about these topics in your sex ed class?” (1 = ‘I have learned little to none of my knowledge about these topics in sex ed class.’, 5 = ‘I have learned most or all of my knowledge about these topics in sex ed class.’) In total, 51% of students responded either 1 or 2, indicating that students are often learning more about sex ed through friends, family, and other resources than they are from sex education curriculum in school. In comparison, only 22% of students responded either 4 or 5.

On a scale from 1 to 5, how much have you learned about these topics in your sex ed class?  
(Not from outside resources ex: friends, family)

140 responses



These results are consistent with the fact that **one-third of students indicated that they felt their sex ed curriculum was lacking.**



When asked “Is there anything specific you would like to see added to your sex ed curriculum?”, 48 students responded with topics they felt were not adequately covered in their school curriculum. The biggest thing that was listed as lacking in the survey was LGBTQ+ inclusivity, but responses also mentioned a lack of discussion and resources related to sexual assault, consent, and healthy communication in relationships.

***Here’s what students are saying about sex education at their high schools:***

“Someone asked me if lesbians are real so just anything that shows lesbians aren’t just for straight guys entertainment please.”

“Like I said [health class] was horrible and literally taught me nothing. I hope they have changed it by now but when I took it it was horrible. What I know about trans people and gender dysphoria is



actually from one of my friends that is trans and he has taught me everything I know, and has been kind and open to questions. However, so many people I know are in the dark about gender identity and it would really help for it to be added into our health curriculum.”

“It’s a “student taught” class which means no one will actually learn REAL sex Ed”

“The teachers seem reluctant to talk about lgbt subjects and pleasure”

“We only talked about sex ed for about two weeks my freshmen year, and maybe a week my sophomore year. The only reason I know how to practice safe sex is because I sought out the knowledge on my own.”

### **Policy Recommendations**

Based on OUT Maine’s Youth Policy Board research, board members identified six recommendations related to sex education in Maine schools. Since decision making around sex education curricula occurs within school districts rather than on a state level, these recommendations are specific to changes that can be implemented by school districts.

**Training:** Health teachers should receive up to date training about sex ed each year. We recommend that these trainings happen in person, and provide health teachers with current information and resources to bring to their classrooms. Regular trainings would help ensure that health teachers are receiving the most up to date information to share with their students, and ultimately help students feel supported by their health teacher.

**Updated textbooks:** Many of the textbooks currently used in sex ed curricula are out of date and/or lacking important information, especially about the LGBTQ+ community. Students and teachers would benefit from updated health textbooks that include accurate information about LGBTQ+ people, specifically with regard to underrepresented communities such as queer and trans BIPOC and intersex people.

**Resource availability:** Health teachers should have a list of resources in their classroom for when they don’t know how to answer a student’s question. We



recommend that this list include resources such as a local LGBTQ+ center, a Planned Parenthood, and mental health support. If a student is seeking information about something the health teacher feels unprepared to answer, recommending that student to a more knowledgeable outside source is more beneficial and helpful in the long run.

**Age appropriate content each year:** School districts should strive to teach age appropriate health content each year from kindergarten through 12th grade. We recommend that elementary school health content focus on consent and familiarity with the human body; middle school health curricula should focus on puberty, masturbation, and gender and sexual identity; and high school sex education classes should include a trauma-informed healthy relationship curriculum, a comprehensive and integrated approach to gender and sexual identity (being LGBTQ+ should not be considered outside of the norm), an emphasis on communication skills, and a discussion of shame and stigma taught alongside accurate information about preventing and treating STDs and STIs.

**Do not divide by gender for “puberty talk”:** Do not divide “girls” and “boys” for the elementary or middle school puberty or sex ed talk. We recommend teaching sex ed from kindergarten and never dividing students by gender. This practice creates unnecessary harm and confusion by linking sex to gender and does not support non-binary people or people who are intersex.

**Board of students and adults to review content taught in health classes:** As students who have often taught ourselves more about safe sex and sexuality, we believe that a board of students, community members, and school staff should be consulted to review health class content to keep health curricula up to date.

### **Future Steps**

The OUT Maine Youth Policy Board plans to share their research findings and recommendations with organizations, school administrators, and teachers throughout Maine. Organizations include Maine Family Planning, Planned Parenthood NE, the Maine Youth Action Network, the LGBTQ+ SupportME Network, and Students Speak Up - an organization based in southern Maine in which other high school age youth have also pushed for a more inclusive sex ed curriculum in their high schools. The



policy board asks that these organizations use this research to guide their work with school districts and any youth groups that they work with.

The OUT Maine youth policy board has also lent their voice and research findings to other youth gatherings. In February 2020, OUT Maine's Youth Policy Board traveled to Augusta to attend the Young People's Caucus at the Cross Building across from the Maine State House. This Young People's Caucus was entitled *Maine's Future: A Focus on Underrepresented Voices of Youth* and brought together youth activist groups from across the state. OUT Maine's Youth Policy Board joined with other youth activist groups to speak before lobbyists and legislators about issues affecting young people in the state of Maine. The group spoke about poverty and housing, mental health resources, Maine's foster system, and being openly queer in Maine.