

# Promoting Lifelong Well-being Through Comprehensive Sexuality Education

## Transformative Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Sexual health education, like any school subject, is not taught in a vacuum but takes place in classrooms that are shaped by the historical, political, systemic, structural, and institutional factors that influence all aspects of society.

The social determinants of health framework highlights factors—economic stability, neighborhood and physical environment, education, food, community and social context, health care systems—that impact individual health outcomes.<sup>1</sup> [Dr. Camara Jones](#) then extends this to include the social determinants of equity which considers the societal systems of oppression—racism, sexism, cisheterosexism, ableism, and economic systems—that shape social determinants of health.<sup>2</sup> Conversations on how to enact Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) policies take place within this context, as does the writing and passing of laws that mandate and regulate this instruction.

CSE constitutes medically accurate, age-appropriate, and culturally responsive education that covers not only anatomy, consent, and human sexuality, but also gender identity, sexual orientation, and healthy relationships. More recently, CSE has come to encompass sex trafficking, intimate partner violence, and mental and behavioral health education. Teaching CSE in schools has been shown to reduce unintended teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), reduce bullying, and improve school climate.<sup>3,4,5</sup>

Yet, to be transformative, CSE must go further than addressing individual behaviors; it must thoughtfully and intentionally integrate the social determinants of health and equity. If sexual health education focuses solely on behaviors such as condom use, it ignores the wide range of factors that influence access to health care that must be inclusive of sexual health care, as well as interpersonal and relational experiences and dynamics that influence decision-making. By considering the social determinants of health and equity, CSE is a powerful foundation for lifelong health as a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social wellbeing of mind, body, and spirit.

During the 2023–24 school year, Cardea supported sexual health work in 27 states and Puerto Rico. This brief will consider the landscape and scope of our work in California, the state in which we were founded in 1971 and in which we have the greatest depth of experience. While California has long been a leader in sexuality education, its landmark CSE legislation was hard-won and owes its existence in large part to decades of advocacy and activism by community members and organizations, including Cardea and our team.<sup>6</sup>

## California Healthy Youth Act

The California Comprehensive Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Prevention Education Act was passed in 2003, authorizing school districts to instruct on sexual health while requiring HIV/AIDS prevention education.<sup>7</sup> The law was updated in 2015 and the renamed California Healthy Youth Act (CHYA) went into effect the following

year, becoming one of the most robust sexual education mandates in the country.<sup>8,9</sup>

CHYA requires comprehensive, age-appropriate, and medically accurate instruction at least once in middle school and at least once in high school. This instruction must be appropriate for all races, genders, sexual orientations, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, differing abilities, and English learners; the materials must further be free of bias and any promotion of religious doctrine. The law's language includes adolescent relationships abuse and sex trafficking, as well as a focus on healthy attitudes, behaviors, and relationships.

Additionally, CHYA utilizes opt-out parental consent, meaning all students receive sex ed unless their parent or caregiver provides a written request to excuse them. Critically, this opt-out does not apply to instruction or materials that address "gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, discrimination, harassment, bullying, intimidation, relationships, or family and do not discuss human reproductive organs and their functions"<sup>10</sup> (i.e., students cannot be excused from a social studies course that discusses historic LGBTQIA+ public figures or the wage gap).

The code's remit was expanded in 2018 (effective 2019) to encompass charter schools, thereby covering all public schools in California.<sup>11,12</sup>

## ***Compliance***

Despite CHYA's broad and detailed mandate, compliance is not straightforward or comprehensive. In 2022, Equality California contacted all 343 public school districts in the state for participation in a Safe and Supportive Schools Report Card but received responses from only 118. Of these 118, 87% reported offering sexual health education that is

mandatory (opt-out), and 76% reported offering LGBTQ+ inclusive sexual health education, despite both being required under CHYA.<sup>13</sup>

While the California Department of Education (CDE) can audit districts, there has historically been no state-run compliance mechanism. Monitoring has been left up to either the school district or, as is often the case, concerned parents, community members, or nonprofit organizations. CHYA requires instructional materials be made available to parents and guardians, so, if the curriculum is out of compliance, action can be pursued through complaints—or lawsuits—with their children's school boards, or at a higher level, American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), or California's Attorney General. Earlier this year, the California State Auditor established compliance guidelines.<sup>14,15</sup>

## ***Relevant policies***

Legislative sessions often see changes and updates to California's Education Code, and many directly or indirectly impact the provision of CSE. The 2023–24 session saw the passage of 8 relevant bills, ranging from expansion of access to menstrual products in schools to establishment of anti-body shaming policies.<sup>16</sup>

These legislative efforts represent a patchworked attempt to enact vital protections for California's young people, often the culmination of years of work on the part of advocates and communities. Each of these policies advances and acknowledges a larger, whole truth: the wellbeing of young people (and the adults they will become) does not begin or end with the teaching of sexual health education, but remains one of our most powerful tools.

Alongside the continuous work of lawmakers and advocates exists the refusal of some school boards and districts to implement CHYA and other policies. Ongoing legal challenges between parents and teachers, school boards, and the California Attorney General point to both the difficulty and critical importance of implementing truly inclusive and supportive CSE in California schools, despite strong support at the state-level.

## Our Approach

Cardea is a national, women of color-led organization with over 50 years of experience in public health and more than 25 years of experience supporting school districts and youth-serving organizations throughout the U.S. with the promotion of sexual health education for young people. We envision a world in which optimal health and wellbeing, equity, and justice are realities for all communities, and we address complex program, policy, and systems issues by co-creating solutions that center community strengths and wisdom.

Our CSE work in California spans all four of our strategic approaches—Professional Learning, Capacity Building, Social Impact and Evaluation, and Policy Advancement—and centers our belief that CSE can, and should, be a building block of integrated health throughout the lifespan.

Two key state and regional programs are the [CSE Network](#) meetings and the [Let's Talk About Sex... Education](#) workshops. CSE Networks are professional learning communities that support school districts in implementing comprehensive sex education. Let's Talk About Sex... Education workshops are for both administrators and educators: For administrators, the workshops explore nuanced content around CSE implementation, while the workshops for educators focus on advanced topic areas in sex education.

Through tailored capacity development at the district level, we support partners at all stages of their implementation journey. Depending on the partner, our support might include curriculum selection and adoption, community engagement and parent/caregiver workshops, presentations to school boards, coaching, classroom observation, and support facilitating taskforces.

### In California and across the U.S., we support school systems and their partners on a variety of levels:

- Statewide through our work with state agencies and youth-serving organizations
- Regionally in collaboration with County Offices of Education (COEs), local agencies, and other organizations that support school districts
- School districts through consultation and technical assistance for district leadership and administration
- School systems through professional development and training for teachers, principals, and families

In addition, we support programs of all sizes through full-scope social impact evaluation, with services including needs assessment, literature review, data collection, implementation monitoring, and curriculum evaluation.

In all our work, we strive to bridge the gap between policy and practice. When partnering with school districts, we support review, development, and implementation of policies that are CHYA compliant and LGBTQIA+ inclusive, foster safe and supportive environments, promote racial and reproductive equity and justice, and connect students to sexual and other health services.

We are a member of statewide collaboratives like the Adolescent Sexual Health Work Group (ASHWG) that implement and advocate for CSE policy. We further partner with entities like the ACLU to facilitate resource sharing, development of accountability tools, and compliance tracking.

## Our Impact

As outlined in the introduction, Cardea supported sexual health work in 27 states and Puerto Rico during the 2023–24 school year. In California, we engaged over 150 school districts and 20 COEs, in addition to holding CSE networks and Let’s Talk about Sex... Education series that touched nearly every county in the state. This work spanned more than 100 trainings and events, including 60 distinct professional development trainings for teachers, 37 parent/caregiver workshops (including 8 in Spanish), 15 professional development opportunities for administrators and school leaders, seven (7) CSE networks (including two new networks for COEs in Southern California and rural Northern California), and two (2) task forces. We are currently in multi-year capacity building partnerships with 12 districts, and continue to expand these types of partnerships.

## Learnings and opportunities

- Offering more advanced topic-based content with links to state policy and practical application
- Moving beyond district-level to include more county-level partnership and support
- Increasing support for puberty education aligned with grade 4–6 scope and sequence
- Deeper collaboration with state agencies and community partners
- Linking education with access to health services

We welcome opportunities to connect! For more information about Cardea’s work, please visit [cardeaservices.org](https://cardeaservices.org).

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