



***Testimony submitted to the Joint Committee on Education
In Support of H. 410/S.263 An Act relative to healthy youth
By Tracy Brown, LWVMA Legislative Specialist on Women's Issues
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The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts has a long history of supporting public policy that protects reproductive choice, consumer education on maintaining health, and equal access to education for children. The LWVMA, along with a lengthy list of widely respected health and education organizations,¹ supports sex education in our public schools.

H. 410/S.263 is grounded in good public policy and offers equal access by ensuring that children across the state will get an age-appropriate education about health-related issues, including those related to sex education. Also, this bill upholds existing state law that allows parents to opt their children out of sex education programs.

Research shows that providing medically accurate, age-appropriate sex education helps young people stay healthy – enhancing their ability to learn.² Learning was also enhanced when students felt safe to attend school. Students who attended schools with an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum were less likely to miss school (18% vs. 35%) for safety reasons.³

In Massachusetts today, such sex education is not universal. In some public school districts, we find excellent health education, while in others there can be little to no teaching on this subject. Even today, the laws governing educational standards in the Commonwealth do not explicitly recognize health education as a core subject. As a result, there is no guarantee that the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) will continue to maintain academic standards on this subject to help local school districts meet students' educational needs.

In 1993, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that the Commonwealth must provide an adequate education for those enrolled in the public schools. The Court defined "adequacy" by requiring that students possess specific capabilities, including "sufficient self-knowledge and knowledge of his or her mental and physical wellness."⁴

In response to this ruling, DESE created a science-based health education framework. When it comes to personal relationships and sex, these programs teach the benefits of abstinence, while providing vital information on contraception and prevention of pregnancy, disease and violence.⁵

¹ The American Medical Association, the American Nurses Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the American Public Health Association, the Institute of Medicine, the National Association of School Nurses, Society of Adolescent Medicine, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, and the National School Boards Association.

² Freudenberg N, Ruglis J, *Reframing School Dropout as Public Health Issue*, *Prev Chronic Dis* 2007; 4(4), http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2007/oct/07_0063.htm, accessed May 28, 2019.

³ National Association of School Nurses, *Sexual Health Education in Schools*, <https://www.nasn.org/advocacy/professional-practice-documents/position-statements/ps-sexual-health>, revised June, 2017, accessed May 28, 2019.

⁴ *McDuffy v. Sec'y of the Executive Office of Educ.*, 415 Mass. 545, 615 N.E.2d 516 (Mass. 1993)

⁵ Douglas Kirby, *The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, Emerging Answers 2007: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases* 127-136, 2007, http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/EA2007/EA2007_full.pdf.



Providing information to teens that helps them make informed decisions about their health is especially critical to improving educational achievement, given that teen pregnancy is the leading cause of dropout among young women. Also, these curricula cover critical topics such as nutrition, mental health, safety, substance abuse and violence prevention.

The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts, which represents 47 local Leagues from Cape Cod to the Berkshires, urges the members of the Joint Committee on Education to give H.410/S.263 a favorable report and move to make this bill the law in Massachusetts.

Thank you for your consideration.