



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

March 12, 2019

The Honorable Rep. Sharon Tomiko Santos
Chair, House Committee on Education
236A John L. O'Brien, P.O. Box 40600
Olympia, Washington 98504-0466

Re: SUPPORT for SB 5395, Testimony from American Atheists in support of legislation requiring comprehensive sexual health education

Dear Chairperson Santos and Members of the House Committee on Education:

American Atheists, on behalf of its nearly 1,500 constituents in Washington State, thanks you for considering SB 5395, a vital measure that will require that schools provide comprehensive sexual health education for students in Washington. This legislation will ensure that all students have access to evidence-informed, medically accurate instruction about their sexual health, allowing them to make well-educated decisions about their lives and become thriving adults. We urge you to swiftly pass this important legislation to educate and protect Washington students.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the “wall of separation” between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. As advocates for the health, safety, and well-being of all Americans, American Atheists supports the fair and scientifically accurate education of young people, free of religious misinformation and coercion.

This bill requires that all Washington public schools provide sexual health education that is evidenced-informed and comprehensive. Moreover, it requires that the curriculum be inclusive for all students covered by Washington’s non-discrimination law, ensuring that vulnerable students who may be less likely to receive sexual health education, such as LGBTQ young people, are proactively included.

Sexual health has a profound impact on the health and well-being of young people. Research shows that by eighth grade 26% of Washington students had engaged in sexual intercourse and by twelfth

grade, the number of students doubled to 51%.¹ Young people between the ages of 15-24 comprise a quarter of the United States' sexually active population, but they account for half of sexually transmitted infections annually.² Despite these figures, 20% of schools in Washington offer no sexual health education or offer less than one hour of instruction.³ Moreover, 60% of Washington teachers reported wanting additional annual professional development in sexual health issues.

Evaluations of comprehensive sex education programs show that these programs can help youth delay onset of sexual activity, reduce the frequency of sexual activity, reduce the number of sexual partners, reduce risk taking, and increase condom and contraceptive use.⁴ Finally, parents strongly prefer the type of sexual health education promoted by this bill. A 2014 survey of parents shows broad support nationally for comprehensive sex education (89%).⁵

We urge you to pass this vital measure, as it will educate and protect young people in Washington, helping them grow into healthy, thriving adults, and resulting in public health dividends for all residents. If you should have any questions regarding American Atheists' support for SB 5395, please contact me at 908.276.7300 x309 or by email at agill@atheists.org.

Sincerely,



Alison Gill, Esq.
Vice President, Legal and Policy
American Atheists

cc: All Members of the Washington House Committee on Education

¹ Washington Superintendent of Public Instruction. (2017). Youth Sexual Health: Education, Youth Behaviors, & School Safety Fact Sheet. Available at

<http://www.k12.wa.us/HIVSexualhealth/pubdocs/YouthSexualHealthFactSheet.pdf>.

² CDC. (2013). Sexually Transmitted Infections among Young Americans. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/std/products/youth-sti-infographic.pdf>.

³ 2016 Washington School Health Profiles, as reported by health teachers. For additional details on survey methodology, please visit <http://www.k12.wa.us/HealthFitness/SchlHealthProfiles.aspx>.

⁴ UNESCO. (2018). International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770>.

⁵ Kantor L and Levitz N. (2017). Parents' views on sex education in schools: How much do Democrats and Republicans agree? PLoS ONE 12(7): e0180250. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0180250>.