



[New York State Education
Department, 2024]

Sex Education Communications Campaign Proposal for the New York State Education Department



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COM-690 Communication Capstone 2024
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December 8, 2024

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Executive Summary

NYSED serves a vital function within New York State: the guidance and governance of our public schools. Schools are where we form the beliefs, values and behavioral norms that are at the core of who we become as adults and how we contribute to society. NYSED recognizes this phenomenon and enacts policies to promote equity and understanding that challenge structural bias and discrimination.

Schools have much influence over how youth formulate attitudes and ideas about gender norms and equity. Nowhere are these matters more discussed than in a sex education class. Sex education provides the foundation on which we develop an understanding of gender dynamics and identity. It is also where students learn to set and respect boundaries and make informed decisions. Without a comprehensive curriculum that provides thorough and accurate information on sexual relations and identity, students are left vulnerable to misinformation.

NYSED has the opportunity to play an essential role in the provision of comprehensive sex education (CSE) in New York State. CSE has been shown to safeguard public health, by reducing sexually transmitted infections and teen pregnancy, while also addressing gender politics that may curb sexual aggression and homophobic bullying (Lieberman & Goldfarb, 2022). In addition, CSE can help youths formulate healthy relationships and attitudes about themselves and others (Lieberman & Goldfarb, 2022). The provision of CSE, therefore, may help young people develop into healthy, well-adjusted adults that are able to contribute to our democracy in meaningful ways.

However, New York State currently has little guidance on the provision of sex education. While CSE is supported by the vast majority of New Yorkers, the New York State legislature has failed to pass a mandate. While it is unclear why no such provisions have been made, it is possible that the public is unaware of current sex education standards (or the lack thereof) or does not consider sex education a priority in education. Without a CSE mandate and standards, some schools may be using curriculum that is incomplete, inaccurate and/or biased if they teach sex education at all. The current sex education environment is analyzed in the situational analysis that follows.

The communications campaign proposal outlined after the situational analysis is designed to increase awareness of the lack of sex education standards in New York State and clarify the importance of CSE. The proposal targets parents of school-aged youth who may be in a position to advocate for a state mandate. It also attempts to introduce certain CSE tenets, such as consent and open communication, to New York State students. The campaign was designed to utilize existing NYSED resources with minimal expense. At the same time, it offers a new approach to public engagement meant to foment change on a statewide level.

NYSED has the authority and resources to spearhead this project and ensure its success. With NYSED's guidance, we have the opportunity to enshrine CSE in our public schools and shape a better future.

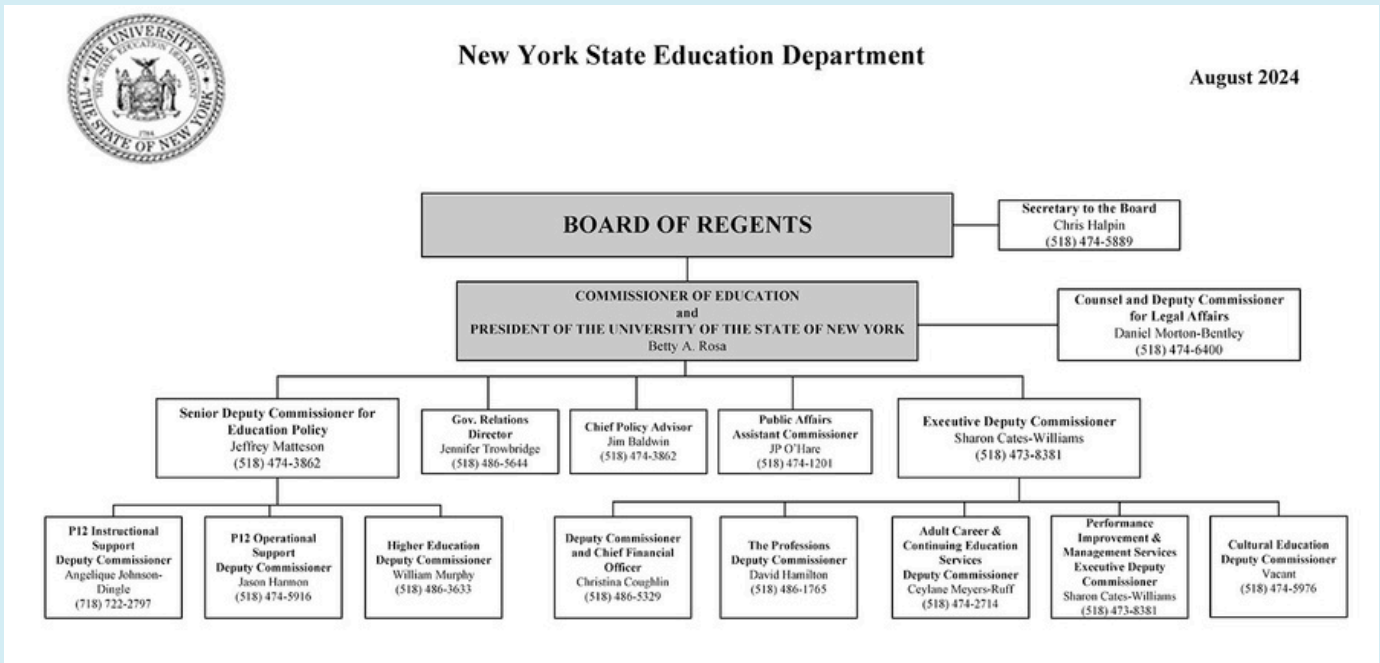
Situational Analysis



Background

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) is part of the New York State university system (*About nysed*, n.d.). The organization is responsible for supervising K-12 education in New York State and provides resources and guidance to teachers, schools and parents (New York State Education Department, 2024).

The New York State Board of Regents presides over NYSED and “is responsible for the general supervision of all educational activities within the State” (*About Us*, n.d.). Regents are appointed by New York State legislators and serve for five-year terms (*About the Board of Regents*, n.d.). Regents appoint the New York State commissioner of education, who serves as the chief executive officer of NYSED (*Regents and state education dept*, n.d.). The following chart outlines the organizational structure of NYSED:



[Nysed Organization Chart, n.d.]

As a public institution, NYSED is insulated from the vagaries of public sentiment and has no direct competition. The organization “manages the distribution of over \$26 billion in aid to localities throughout New York,” which gives it widespread influence over New York schools (*Finance & Business*, n.d.). As a government agency with control of a substantial amount of public funds, NYSED holds an authoritative position within the state’s educational system. NYSED uses its influence to dictate policy (*Regents and state education dept*, n.d.). According to NYSUT (the New York State United Teachers union), “the rules and regulations it adopts have the force of law” (*Regents and state education dept*, n.d.).

SWOT Analysis

Sex education is currently not mandated in the United States or the State of New York (Caruso et al., 2023; Guanci, 2022; Jones, 2021; Lieberman & Goldfarb, 2022; Moreno, 2021). As an organization, NYSED has not provided any policy position or guidance on sex education in public schools. Nor does the organization openly comment on the importance of comprehensive sex education (CSE). It would, however, fall within the purview of NYSED to influence CSE policy, which may have a significant impact on public education and the public interest.

The following SWOT analysis examines NYSED’s position on sex education. A SWOT analysis explores an entity’s Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (Berry, 2023). This framework will help identify the internal and external matters that will inform the proposed campaign strategy that follows (Berry, 2023).

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Public trust and authority• Access to government and advocacy groups• DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) policy to build on	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No official position on CSE• No guidance provided on CSE instruction• Lack of urgency
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Contribute to improved health outcomes in New York State• Advance human rights• Create a better informed and empowered citizenry	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Opposition from conservative and religious elements• Federal support and funding for AO (abstinence only) sex education• Inadequate curriculum

STRENGTHS

As a *public authority* with a long history of providing policy and guidance on education in New York State, NYSED is imbued with the power of the state and is charged with acting in the public interest. As such, the public and government have put their *trust* in NYSED and

the decisions it makes. Developing guidance on a statewide curriculum for CSE and advocating for a CSE mandate would contribute to students in New York State receiving consistent and reliable information about sex, sexuality and sex-related issues, which falls within NYSED’s mandate and supports the public interest (*Policy & Guidance*, 2021). Research indicates that CSE promotes the public interest, not only through the prevention of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STI), but also because it “...prevents child sex abuse; decreases dating and intimate partner violence; reduces homophobic bullying and harassment; improves communication with peers, parents, partners, and medical providers; and develops other life skills such as empathy, managing feelings, sense of self-control and safety, and ability to establish and maintain positive relationships, which all contribute to lifelong sexual health, safety, and well-being” (Lieberman & Goldfarb, 2022). Public opinion also supports the adoption of CSE with 87 percent of New York voters favoring the provision of CSE in public schools (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012; Jones, 2021).

NYSED has a multitude of resources available to assist with communication for the need, as well as implementation, of CSE. These include access to *state entities* with interest in promoting CSE, such as the Department of Public Health, the Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the New York State Bipartisan Pro-Choice Legislative Caucus (Jones, 2021). In addition, there are a number of *advocacy groups* that support CSE in New York State, including the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU), Planned Parenthood of Greater New York, Stop the Shaming, the National Institute for Reproductive Health (NIRH) and local National Organization for Women (NOW) chapters (Jones, 2021). These groups are well-positioned to advocate for CSE among the general public as well as within the legislature.

NYSED has contributed to discussions surrounding *diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)* to include policy papers on the benefits of DEI for all students, a “Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework” grounded in principles that support the development of an inclusive scholastic experience and resources for implementing this framework (*Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework*, n.d.). NYSED recognizes that an inclusive culture is necessary to challenge the “complex system of biases and structural inequities... at play” in our democracy (*Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework*, n.d.). The Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework offers clear guidance on promoting gender and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning) equality within schools (*Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework*, n.d.). However, NYSED does not extend this guidance to the sexual education curriculum in New York State. According to an analysis conducted by the NYCLU, current sexual education curriculum in New York is inconsistent and varies widely by district (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012). NYCLU found that instruction was largely heterocentric and sometimes stigmatized the LGBTQ+ community (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012).

WEAKNESSES

NYSED's purpose to serve the public interest is *weakened without CSE policy and guidance*. In their report on the current sexual education curriculum in New York, the NYCLU states: "the lack of a mandate or binding standards requiring medically accurate, age-appropriate, comprehensive and unbiased sex education puts New York students, and the public health, at undue risk" (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012, p. 5). These risks may include higher rates of STIs and teen pregnancy as well as lowered emotional wellbeing, which "together limit young people's education, hobbling their potential for personal and economic independence, and adding significant costs to the state" (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012, p. 6). Thus, the lack of CSE in New York undermines NYSED's altruistic mission "to raise the knowledge, skill, and opportunity of all the people in New York" (*About nysed*, n.d.).

Furthermore, *without definitive guidance* on curriculum, many New York students are receiving inaccurate, outdated or incomplete information about anatomy and sexuality (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012). No oversight or guidance on curriculum has also led to the use of materials that reflect harmful gender stereotypes and stigmatize LGBTQ+ students (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012). Currently, sex education curriculum in New York State is supporting structural inequities and contributing to ignorance, which could have serious repercussions on health, wellbeing and access to education in New York State.



The lack of information on CSE on the NYSED website suggests a *lack of urgency* among education policymakers. This may unwittingly send a message to local school districts that current sexual education standards are adequate and do not need to be further addressed. The lack of attention given to CSE may also erroneously lead the public to believe there are CSE standards in place.

OPPORTUNITIES

Research has shown that CSE decreases both STI and teen pregnancy rates, sexual violence and homophobic bullying while contributing to the positive development of communication skills and healthy relationships (Caruso et al., 2023; Guanci, 2022; Jones, 2021; Lieberman & Goldfarb, 2022; Moreno, 2021). Thus, CSE supports a *path towards more optimal public health*, educational and interpersonal outcomes. Many international organizations - including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - consider CSE a *human right*:

The right to receive comprehensive sexuality education derives from a range of protected rights, such as the right to live free from violence and discrimination, the right to the highest attainable standard of mental and physical health, but also the right to receive and impart information and the right to quality and inclusive education, including human rights education. [Mijatović, 2023]

In contrast, negative gender stereotypes and/or a presumption of heterosexuality (or blatant homophobic sentiment) are found throughout much of the sex education curriculum currently in use in New York State threatening women’s and LGBTQ+ rights (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012). For example, one handout presented women as an “unstable element:”

 HAZARDOUS MATERIALS DATA SHEET 	
ELEMENT:	Woman
SYMBOL:	○+
DISCOVERER:	Adam
ATOMIC MASS:	Accepted as 55kg, but known to vary from 45kg to 225kg
<u>PHYSICAL PROPERTIES</u>	
1. Body surface normally covered with film of powder and paint 2. Boils at absolutely nothing – freezes for no apparent reason	
<u>CHEMICAL PROPERTIES</u>	
1. Reacts well to gold, platinum and all precious stones 2. Explodes spontaneously without reason or warning 3. The most powerful money reducing agent known to man	
<u>COMMON USE</u>	
1. Highly ornamental, especially in sports cars 2. Can greatly aid relaxation 3. Can be a very effective cleaning agent	
<u>HAZARDS</u>	
1. Turns green when placed alongside a superior specimen 2. Possession of more than one is possible but specimens must never make eye contact	

[*Birds, bees and bias*, 2012, p. 45]

A positive CSE policy would protect the rights of students, which, again, supports NYSED’s aim to work in favor of the public interest.

By encompassing medically accurate information and evidence-based scholarship, CSE also champions the basic and original purpose of public education: to *create a better informed and empowered citizenry* capable of participating in a democracy (*Why We Still Need Public Schools*, n.d.). In recent decades, after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, this purpose has been extended to include the provision of equal education to promote “full equality in other areas” (*Why We Still Need Public Schools*, n.d., p. 6). Yet, much of the current curriculum used throughout New York State erodes equality. For example, in a NYCLU 2012 survey of sex education material used throughout New York State, nearly all (89 percent) school districts “failed to portray teenage same-sex couples in images, role plays or relationship exercises” while even more (94 percent) “failed to acknowledge same-sex parents” (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012, pp. 37, 38). Other examples of materials that stigmatize LGBTQ+ individuals include the following language:

- Most [HIV] infected people are homosexual men and drug users who used unsterile needles”
- One textbook defined homosexuality under “Taboo Definitions”
- Students experiencing same-sex attraction should seek “counseling”
- Marriage is “a lifelong union between a husband and a wife”

[*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012, pp. 37, 38]

Such language casts homosexuality in a negative light, which does little to empower LGBTQ+ students or promote their equality in a school setting (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012). NYSED has the opportunity to recommend lessons that would, on the other hand, more accurately reflect reality and promote tolerance and understanding. An inclusive CSE curriculum would underpin the department’s Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework, which was developed to foster:

...student-centered learning environments that affirm cultural identities; foster positive academic outcomes; develop students’ abilities to connect across lines of difference; elevate historically marginalized voices; empower students as agents of social change; and contribute to individual student engagement, learning, growth, and achievement through the cultivation of critical thinking. [*Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework*, n.d.]

CSE would strengthen existing policy intended to address the needs of a diverse student body while discouraging bullying and harassment.

THREATS

Threats to CSE in New York State largely stem from a climate based on *abstinence-only (AO) education* (Caruso et al., 2023; Guanci, 2022; Jones, 2021; Lieberman & Goldfarb, 2022; Moreno, 2021). AO programs, such as the federally-funded Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) program, attempt to discourage students from engaging in sexual activity before marriage (*Federally funded abstinence-only programs*, 2021). These initiatives have been widely debunked as ineffective at preventing STIs and teen pregnancy, and often promote heteronormative, sexist and otherwise discriminatory ideas (Jones, 2021; *Bird, bees and bias*, 2012; *Federally funded abstinence-only programs*, 2021; Lieberman & Goldfarb, 2022). AO programs are supported by *conservative and religious groups*, such as Focus on the Family, Moms for Liberty, The Eagle Forum and the Medical Institute for Sexual Health (Beahm, 2023). According to a sex education analysis by Carolyn Jones, the Catholic Conference provides the “greatest opposition” to CSE in New York State (Jones, 2021, p. 16).

The NYCLU’s survey of health textbooks used for sex education in New York State suggests that there is a *dearth of content promoting CSE* (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012). According to their analysis, most textbooks were abstinence-only (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012). Of the textbooks analyzed, only one – ThinkB4YouSpeak – addressed gender identity and transgender individuals (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012). Therefore, teachers who wish to provide CSE in New York may be forced to develop their own curriculum from various other sources like the web and other media (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012). Without the proper resources for teaching CSE, students may be receiving incomplete, inaccurate and/or biased information about sex in their health classes (if they are provided with any information at all). A student body ignorant about sexual health may be more susceptible to the risks associated with sexual activity (e.g. STIs and pregnancy) and misinformation concerning sex and gender identity.



[F, J., n.d.]

Causes and Solutions

It remains unclear why there seems to be a lack of urgency or awareness about CSE at NYSED and within New York State in general. Carolyn Jones published a comparison of CSE in California and New York, which sought to uncover why the California legislature passed a CSE mandate while New York did not (Jones, 2021). Her conclusion hypothesized that the New York State legislature, who, at the time (the 2018-2019 legislative session), recently turned to a Democratic majority, might simply have been too busy passing other priority legislation to focus on CSE (Jones, 2021). However, in a later analysis by Danielle Chan (published four years after Jones published her thesis), the author found that the legislature, still dominated by Democrats, had still not mandated CSE (Chan, 2022). Chan analyzed prevailing attitudes about CSE in California, New York and Alabama and hypothesized that strong religious influences in Alabama and New York (evangelical Protestants in Alabama and the Catholic Church in New York) might have contributed to a failure to pass CSE legislation (Chan, 2022). There may be holes in Chan’s argument as well as most U.S. Catholics openly disagree with a number of church positions (Evans, 2024).

NYSED has the power and resources to influence and spotlight CSE policy and implementation throughout New York State. The communications campaign proposal that follows is designed to increase awareness of the importance of CSE, introduce important CSE concepts to New York State youth and provide resources for implementing CSE programs throughout the state. The campaign will combine grassroots advocacy with public relations techniques to create a sense of urgency within the community and provide a call to action for the legislature.

Situation Statement

Create awareness about the benefits of comprehensive sex education in order to further NYSED’s mission “to raise the knowledge, skill, and opportunity of all the people in New York” and advocate for a statewide sex education mandate (*About nysed*, n.d.).

Challenges

As a government agency overseen by appointed officials, NYSED is not likely to face any direct challenges to policy it puts forth. However, should NYSED implement a CSE policy, the organization could receive negative backlash from the media, the legislature and/or the public, which may influence enforcement of the policy.

While 87 percent of New York voters favor the introduction of CSE curriculum in public schools, there is a vocal minority who oppose it (Jones, 2021; Myers, 2021; Ratan, 2023). The Catholic Conference, for instance, opposes the legislation that would mandate CSE in New York on the basis that the bill “would encourage promiscuous behaviors and affirm certain beliefs pertaining to sexuality” (Jones, 2021, p. 16). Chan argues that, as the “second largest diocese in the United States by population,” the Catholic Church exerts significant influence over sex education policy in New York State (Chan, 2022). However, as previously stated, most American Catholics openly disagree on a number of church positions, which suggests that the Church’s position may not have as much influence as Chan hypothesizes (Evans, 2024).

CSE legislation is also opposed by conservative legislators within the state. Michael Reilly, a Republican Assemblyman and Education Committee member, argued that the bill would take control of sex education away from the government and “would tie public schools to guidelines set out by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS)” (Best, 2021; Ratan, 2023). Such opposition to CSE has been more prominent in recent years as the political climate has polarized and conservatives have led efforts to restrict reproductive rights and the rights of the LGBTQ+ community (Moreno, 2021; Ratan, 2023). In this environment, where other liberal policies are being challenged, some may view CSE as not being worth the fight.

Communications at NYSED

NYSED is a government organization and part of an “interconnected system of educational services” affiliated with the University of the State of New York (*USNY affiliates*, n.d.). As such, the organization shares social media content from various affiliates, including the University of the State of New York, the New York State Library and the New York State Museum, as well as content from local schools and BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services) and content from other New York State organizations. Similarly, the NYSED website includes a multitude of content for its numerous programs and services as well as various scholastic resources, public data, guidelines and standards, etc.

With much content to sort through, finding information on a specific topic related to NYSED may prove challenging. Research indicates that information overload can make it “difficult for people to filter and prioritize relevant information and ultimately... lead to confusion and difficulty in remembering information” (Shahrzadi et al., 2024). Thus, the abundance of content the organization publishes may work against clarity and understanding. Opportunities to improve upon this model may include:

- Restricting social media content to NYSED programs alone
- Separating content by user segments and creating unique sites for each (e.g. a separate website for teachers with certification and licensing information)
- Conducting an audit to determine what information is redundant or outdated and eliminating unnecessary content (Georgiadis, 2022)

COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGNS

As an organization that may not often deal directly with the public, NYSED has not created many communications campaigns. An exception to this rule is the *My History My Future* communication campaign. Although limited in scope, this campaign has been effective at engaging youth throughout New York State (additional details on this campaign can be found below).

NYSED limits most of its communications to press releases, information housed on the NYSED website and social media. Here is a breakdown of typical content by vehicle:

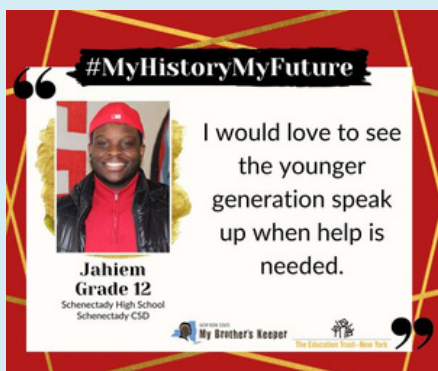
Communications Vehicle	Content
Press releases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New policy and changes to existing policy • Employee appointment and recognition • Data and report releases • Grant awards • Affiliate content • Leadership statements • Recognition of heritage/awareness months
Social Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affiliate content • Recognition of heritage/awareness months • Grant and award applications/deadlines • Event photos and news
Website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational programs • Standards and instruction • School assessments • Teacher certification and licensing • School business (e.g. transportation, budget, school lunch, etc.) • Data and reporting

The NYSED communications model may not be designed for public consumption as this may not be the communications priority within the organization. It is possible the organization views public concern and interest as secondary to a primary function of communicating with schools, which can be accomplished via email, mail or through the Regents themselves. There seems to be no evidence that NYSED has made a strong effort to engage the public, influence public opinion or contribute to any discourse on educational issues. The content put forth by the organization does not seem to serve the purpose of creating a dialogue with the public. While this, again, may not be the goal of the organization, the lack of interaction with NYSED social media suggests that the organization does not garner much attention from the public in turn.

The two examples that follow are representative of the communications that can be found throughout NYSED media (to include their website, social media and press releases).



[My history my future, n.d.]



[#myhistorymyfuture, n.d.]



[#myhistorymyfuture, n.d.]

My History My Future

The My History My Future campaign was designed to “amplify the voices of young people” and encourage them to take pride in their personal or family history as they reflect on the impact of history on their generation (*My history my future*, n.d.). Students are invited to submit a photo and a quote to be published on social media.

Strengths

- My History My Future is fairly easy to track and engage with as it uses a hashtag: #myhistorymyfuture.
- The campaign directly engages students and asks them to contribute to a public dialogue.

Weaknesses

- The campaign only uses one tactic that is employed on social media (i.e. quotes and pictures submitted via a form found on the NYSED website) and, is thus, limited in scope.
- There are no corresponding events, press releases, advertisements, etc.

Framework for Safe, Supportive, and Affirming School Environments for Transgender and Gender Expansive Students

NYSED released guidelines for assisting public schools with adopting an inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ students called the Framework for Safe, Supportive, and Affirming School Environments for Transgender and Gender Expansive Students. They used a press release and social media to link to the framework housed on their website.

Strengths

- NYSED used two channels (a press release and social media) to broadcast the new guidelines promoting visibility.
- Coverage appeared on CNN, Spectrum News and Newsday.
- The guidelines were sent directly to public schools to influence their policies and procedures.

Weaknesses

- NYSED did not tie this policy to sex education despite the overlap in issues.
- No hashtag was used to tie the new policy to other LGBTQ+ content on social media.



[Creating a safe, supportive, and affirming school, n.d.]



[Framework for Safe, Supportive, and Affirming School Environments for Transgender and Gender Expansive Students, n.d.]

As previously noted, NYSED was formed to support the public interest and oversee an important shaping force within society: education. As such, it is possible for the organization to adopt a larger role in informing citizens about educational policy and initiatives using communication to build public trust and understanding. Increased transparency and accountability would help legitimize the organization's role and support efforts to enact educational policy and reform (*The contribution of government communication*, 2009). In addition, good governance experts note that “effective public communication efforts enable citizen participation,” which, again, supports the public interest (*The contribution of government communication*, 2009). Better communication would strengthen NYSED's mandate to create a better informed and empowered citizenry capable of participating in a democracy (*Why We Still Need Public Schools*, n.d.).

Problem-Related Needs

As established earlier, without a CSE program in place, students may be more vulnerable to STIs and teen pregnancy, sexual violence and homophobic bullying (Caruso et al., 2023; Guanci, 2022; Jones, 2021; Lieberman & Goldfarb, 2022; Moreno, 2021). Studies have shown that CSE:

- Reduces teen pregnancy (Mark and Wu, 2022)
- Decreases rates of STIs (*The importance of access to comprehensive sex education*, n.d.)
- Reduces adolescent sexual activity and number of sexual partners (*The importance of access to comprehensive sex education*, n.d.)
- Prevents child sex abuse and sexual violence (Lieberman & Goldfarb, 2022)
- Helps promote communication, empathy and the establishment of health relationships (Lieberman & Goldfarb, 2022)

In addition, the provision of inaccurate or incomplete information about sex may lead to poor decision-making among New York youth (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012; Lieberman & Goldfarb, 2022). For example, as most New York schools do not portray same-sex teenage or adult couples, “LGBTQ students could mistakenly believe that the instruction they have received does not apply to them” and, consequently, may make poorer choices (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012). One Massachusetts study found that LGBTQ+ students who do not receive inclusive sex education “were more likely to report becoming or getting someone pregnant and having more sexual partners, and were found to be at greater risk for HIV infections, pregnancy and suicide as well as bullying, injury or threats of injury at school” (*Bird, bees and bias*, 2012). Without proper instruction, students cannot be expected to make informed decisions about their sexual choices and health. In addition, without an inclusive CSE curriculum, students are more susceptible to misinformation and bias about gender roles and stereotypes.

Campaign Proposal



Goals, Strategies, Objectives and Tactics

The communication campaign that follows outlines an advocacy program designed to change hearts and minds, as well as behavior. While this is a lofty undertaking (social change is not easy) with a number of hurdles to overcome, it delineates a way to initiate a dialogue that may lead to mobilization and real change. This campaign is a starting point that, when added upon, will lead to the development of a “more cohesive story about values and a positive vision” that will shift our collective understanding and allow us to evolve as a democracy (*Vision, values, and voice toolkit*, n.d.). For democracies are dependent on an informed citizenry capable of identifying opportunities to promote equality and fairness, and protect human rights (*Vision, values, and voice toolkit*, n.d.; *Why We Still Need Public Schools*, n.d.).

Research has shown that a values-based strategy that employs universal themes, such as equality, respect/responsibility, public safety and education, speaks to the American national consciousness and inspires action in support of social justice causes (Chiu, 2022; Messages that move action for sex education, n.d.; *Vision, values, and voice toolkit*, n.d.). Such ideals connect us and frame a message within a familiar narrative framework (Messages that move action, n.d.; *Vision, values, and voice toolkit*, n.d.). When followed by a “positive solution” (Chiu, 2022) or “unifying call to action” (Messages that move action, n.d.), a values-based narrative has the potential to inspire not just support but mobilization (Chiu, 2022; Messages that move action for sex education, n.d.; *Vision, values, and voice toolkit*, n.d.). Positive solutions that follow an easily-understood, values-based narrative are also useful in combatting misinformation as well as “compassion fatigue,’ in which people see a parade of social problems as impossible to solve” (*Vision, values, and voice toolkit*, n.d.). Crafting messaging with this strategy will be imperative to creating a successful campaign.

The NYSED CSE Communications Campaign will employ various public relations and grassroots advocacy techniques to increase awareness, change perception and drive action. These will include the following elements:

Goal:

Increase awareness of, and support for, CSE among parents with school-aged children throughout New York State (but, especially in upstate New York)* by 2026

Strategy

- Create awareness of the lack of a CSE mandate in New York State
- Tie CSE to human rights and gender rights/equality to create a better sense of importance and urgency
- Encourage outreach to the New York State legislature and, secondarily, to local school boards

Objectives

- An increase in social media engagement to 1-3.5% (with current engagement rates being quite low, this represents a significant shift) (*What is engagement rate and how to calculate it*, n.d.)
- A multitude of impressions from PSA media spots
- An increase in website traffic to NYSED Sex Ed hub over time as well as number of downloads (of sample correspondences)
- Passage of a CSA mandate in New York State

Tactics:

- A PSA encouraging support of a sex education mandate in New York State with a call to action to contact the legislature
- A *NYSED Sex Ed* hub that includes links to:
 - A sample correspondence for supporters to share with their legislator
 - A sample letter to the editor for supporters to send to their local media outlets
 - Resources for teaching CSE, such as suggested curriculum
 - An official NYSED policy paper
 - State and federal sex education guidelines
- Social media advertising on the importance of CSE with a call to action to contact a legislator or the local school board

*See Relevant Publics and Audiences section below for more details on the target audience.

In addition, it will be important to start engaging youth with CSE messages and tenets to directly involve them in a campaign that is intended to promote their own safety, education and wellbeing. Research has shown that engaging youth informs the creation of “responsive policies and programs” that effectively address needs (Sprague Martinez, Pufall Jones and Connolly, 2020). Here are goals, strategies, objectives and tactics for New York State youth:

Goal:

Shape healthy attitudes about sex and sexuality among students to promote the development of healthy relationships

Strategy

- Increase student’s knowledge about their bodies (anatomy), sex, gender and sex- and gender-related issues
- Engage youth in a discussion of healthy relationships

Objectives

- Decreased rates of student STIs and teen pregnancy
- A decrease of reported acts of gender-based threats and/or violence
- Strong social media engagement (ideally to 1-3.5%) and a multitude of PSA impressions (*What is engagement rate and how to calculate it*, n.d.)
- An increase in the number of Gay-Straight Alliance clubs operating in New York schools

Tactics:

- A public service announcement on the importance of respect and consent in sexual relations
- A social media campaign aimed at promoting respect and responsibility in sexual relations among teens

The following sections elaborate on this strategy by discussing various elements of import to include audiences, messaging, media choices and communications tools. The proposal will conclude with an implementation timeline, estimated costs and a discussion of the evaluation process.

Relevant Publics and Audiences

To design an effective communications campaign, it is essential to identify a target audience that will “react positively to your messages and take action” (Pollard, 2015). Experts recommend analyzing a target audience by identifying audience demographics (e.g. age, gender, income level, etc.), location and psychographics (e.g. interests, attitudes, values, behaviors, etc.) (Meredith, 2024; Roque, 2024). This information will inform what message content will resonate with the audience and, thus drive action, as well as which vehicles will be most effective in delivering campaign messaging (Chiu, n.d.).

Research has identified several groups within New York State to target for optimal campaign efficacy. Common sense dictates that adults with school-aged children who are directly affected by sex education policy might be more motivated to advocate for CSE. As noted above, most New Yorkers are already supportive of CSE, but some may not be aware there is no New York State mandate and very little in the way of guidance (*Birds, bees and bias*, 2012; Jones, 2021). Messaging, therefore, should be directed at the importance of consistent CSE statewide.

As New York City already mandates CSE, parents residing there may be less motivated to act (*Health education*, n.d.). Therefore, the campaign can narrow its primary focus to upstate New York parents of school-aged children. Residents of upstate New York are accustomed to a vastly different economic reality than their downstate counterparts (Conlin, 2023; Karlin, 2024). They are aware that economic opportunity upstate lags far behind that in downstate (Conlin, 2023; Karlin, 2024). In addition, a recent report by the National Parents Union found that “70% of students in Albany, Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse are failing to read or do math at grade level” (*Critical condition: State of education in New York*, 2024). Together, this information suggests that upstate New York parents may be concerned that their children are not receiving the educational opportunities they are entitled to. Messaging that exploits such discrepancies may resonate well amongst this demographic.



Research has shown that supporters of LGBTQ+ and women’s rights, reproductive rights and politically liberal or progressive individuals favor CSE over religious conservatives (Bleakley, 2010; Chiu, n.d.). However, it is not clear whether such socially liberal individuals tie CSE to other policies that affect gender rights. Making this connection clear may increase the likelihood that CSE is viewed as essential to youth development and the defense of civil liberties.

Main Target Audience

New York parents of children under 18 with a focus on upstate, socially liberal individuals

Advocacy communications campaigns, however, may rely on more than citizen involvement. In order to affect real change, legislation should mandate CSE in New York State. School boards are also worth targeting as they directly control choice of curriculum within an individual school district (Capobianco, 2021). A call to action will be included on materials to encourage parents to reach out to their state legislative representatives and, secondarily, their school board to advocate for a statewide CSE mandate and introduce a CSE curriculum.

In addition, the campaign can begin to lay the groundwork for an understanding of more inclusive and comprehensive sexual health among New York State youth by engaging them with CSE messages. These messages should include directives about behavior: actions and attitudes that encourage mutual respect, bodily autonomy and tolerance of difference. Youth should also be engaged to inform policy and curriculum as experts suggest their involvement will offer insight into knowledge gaps and identify critical needs (Sprague Martinez, Pufall Jones and Connolly, 2020).

Messages

As the NYSED CSE Communications Campaign is intended to drive action, change perceptions and influence behavior, messaging will be crucial to eliciting a response. Messages will need to be delivered with clarity and economy in order to optimize understanding and hold the interest of the audience (*Community action toolkit*, n.d.). They should also be value-based and offer positive solutions per the discussion above (Chiu, 2022; Messages that move action for sex education, n.d.; *Vision, values, and voice toolkit*, n.d.).

Messaging should counter misinformation about sex education by constructing a positive narrative based on familiar concepts that resonate with the audience (Chiu, 2022; *Vision, values, and voice toolkit*, n.d.). Falsehoods should not be repeated, as research has shown that this “only serves to deepen the myth in the audiences’ minds” (Chiu, 2022; *Vision, values, and voice toolkit*, n.d.). Instead, messages will positively evoke our cultural norms and focus on what resonates with the audience. The following table provides some broad topics that may serve as a starting point for message development. More detailed examples of messaging by media vehicle can be found in the next section entitled *Media Choices and Other Communications Tools*.

Parents	Students
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Providing the best opportunities for their children• Protecting the rights of children• Optimizing public health and safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creating a more equal society• Responsibility to our fellow citizens• Students’ right to an education (e.g. you have the right to knowledge about sexuality and your bodies taught in a safe environment (Guanci, 2022))

Media Choices and Communications Tools

The media serves as an efficient vehicle for disseminating messages to a large audience. In addition, research has shown that media advocacy not only helps bring an issue to the forefront of public thought, but also influences public opinion (Jernigan and Wright, 1996). In order to select the right channels, it is crucial to evaluate the media habits of the target audience and identify how best to reach them (*Communication plan: A practical example*, 2024).

NYSED CSE Communications Campaign messages will be delivered through multiple media channels to both a broad New York State audience as well as the targeted audience. This will increase the likelihood that the target audience receives the message through multiple touchpoints to ensure message retention and encourage action (*Marketing rule of Seven*, n.d.). The campaign will utilize three major channels for message dissemination:

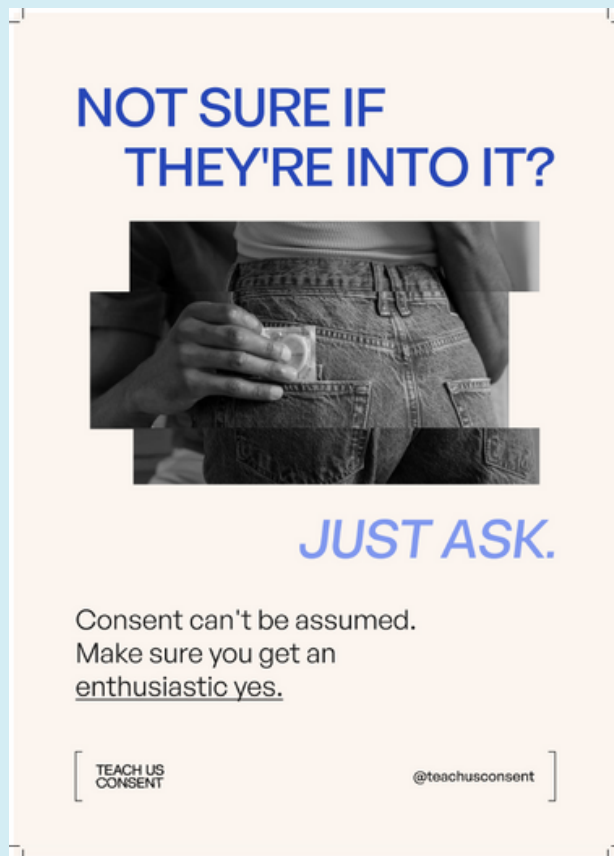
- Traditional media (to include both print and radio)
- Social media (utilizing existing NYSED platforms)
- Web (through the creation of a NYSED Sex Ed hub on the organization website)

TRADITIONAL MEDIA

The campaign will target print and radio outlets with a public service announcement (PSA). PSAs are brief messages about public interest issues aimed at influencing public opinion or behavior and are, therefore, well-suited to campaign objectives (Sivakumaran, Nandakumar and Srivastava, 2023). Both print and broadcast outlets offer free PSA space or airtime for non-profits and government agencies (*Job aid: Public service announcement*, 2024). However, because the space or airtime is free, there is little control over when or where the PSA will appear and placement is not necessarily tracked (Hampton, n.d.).

To reach the target audience, it will be necessary to identify print and radio outlets that are targeted to the right demographic: 1) residents of New York State (with a focus on upstate) who are parents (or adults age 25-55) and 2) New York State youth aged 12-25. Outlets can be identified using media monitoring software, such as Meltwater or Cision, if available. If not, local media outlets can be targeted. For example, in Albany, the *Times Union* newspaper and iHeartMedia radio stations would be good targets for reaching a local audience.

Example of print PSA targeting youth:



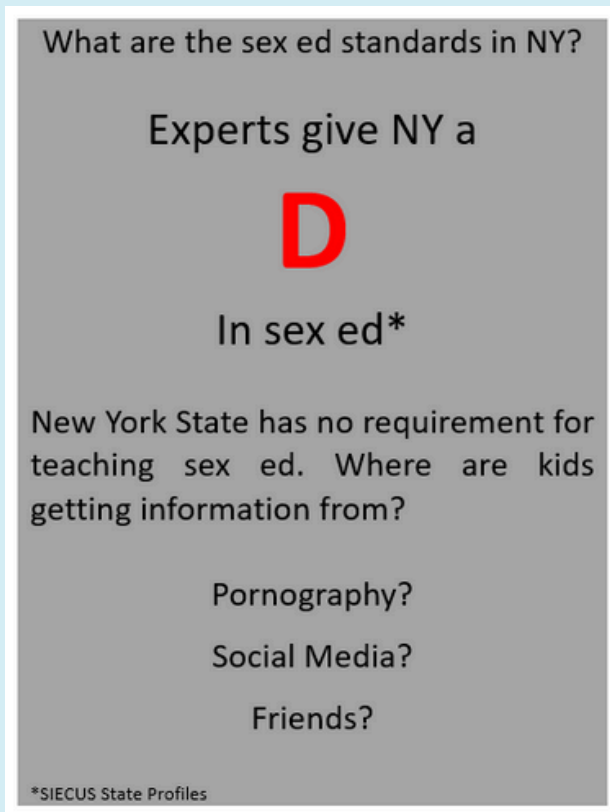
[Resources, n.d.]

This poster from Teach Us Consent, an Australian organization dedicated to curbing sexual violence, is a free resource that could be repurposed as a print PSA (About, n.d.). This piece encourages respect and responsibility towards one's sexual partner.

Example of a 30-second radio PSA targeting youth:

Do we all deserve equal rights? Or only those born a certain way. We all deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, whether we are born white or black, man or woman, gay or straight. That includes what happens in the bedroom. Talk to your partner about what they want. Dignity means including their feelings, concerns and desires. Respect means including them in the conversation. Gender rights are human rights.

Example of print PSA targeting adults:



[*New York State Profile, 2020*]

Example of a 60-second radio PSA targeting adults:

We all want our kids to have the best opportunities. But, right now, they're being shortchanged in New York schools. How? New York currently has no sex education mandate. Schools are not required to teach our kids about responsible decision making, safe sex practices or healthy relationships.

Where are our kids learning about sex then? Pornography? Social media? Friends?

Our kids have the right to age-appropriate, medically accurate information. Information to protect their health and safety, learn how to set boundaries and respect each other. Call your state representative today to demand comprehensive sex education.

SOCIAL MEDIA

The campaign will utilize the social media platforms already established by NYSED: Facebook, X, Instagram and LinkedIn. With the exception of Instagram, NYSED has a solid presence on each of these platforms:

- Instagram – 2,115 followers
- Facebook – 27,000 followers
- LinkedIn – 27,000 followers
- X – 43,300 followers

To target both adult and youth audiences, different strategies will be deployed. A social media advertising campaign using the PSAs developed for print will be used to target adults (please see above for a sample PSA).

For the youth audience, a social media campaign will provide a source for accurate information about sex and sexuality and provide a platform for promoting relationships based on respect and responsibility. As NYSED publishes a multitude of social media content, it will be important to use hashtags, such as #sexed and #sexualhealth, to attract a youth audience. Posting PSAs and informational content once every couple weeks on average would serve well as NYSED includes numerous other topics on its social media platforms. However, during May – *Sex Ed for All* – month, more space will be allocated towards CSE with posting 3-4 times per week (Eisenstein, 2024). Content for social media can include infographics (such as the sample below) or graphics with links to educational resources or the *NYSED Sex Education* hub. In addition, during *Sex Ed for All* month, a special interactive Q&A session with sexual health experts can serve as a way to engage youth while providing accurate information in an anonymous (and comfortable) setting.

Example of infographic targeting youth:

How does the law affect you

Relationships?

You have relationships with lots of different people – your parents, teachers, and other adults, your friends, other children and young people at school and where you live.

As we get older, our relationships become more complex and sometimes it can be hard to work out where we stand, and what is right or wrong.

We may be confused about our sexuality or we could be tricked into behaving in ways that we don't want and we can end up getting hurt.

Your rights!

Knowing your rights, and understanding what is and isn't acceptable in different situations, whether it's your relationships with your parents and family, with your friends or other adults, can give you the confidence to be yourself and build healthy relationships.

From a very young age you will find that you build relationships with many different people.

Your relationships are usually a private matter – but your rights are there to protect you if you get into trouble.

Relationships can be complicated, and you should feel able to ask for help if you are finding things difficult.

[How the Law Affects Me, 2018]

This infographic from the Children's Legal Centre Wales promotes the development of healthy relationships and evokes the cultural norm of human rights.

WEB

In line with NYSED’s other initiatives, a *NYSED Sex Education* hub will be developed to provide information and resources on sexual education in New York State. Given NYSED’s role as the educational authority in New York State, this should include an official policy paper, state and federal sex education guidelines and resources for teaching CSE. In addition, resources will be provided to encourage advocacy, including a sample correspondence for supporters to share with their legislator and a sample letter to the editor.

Sample letter to a New York State legislator:

[Date]

The Honorable [Name of Representative]
[Address of Representative]

Dear Mr./Ms. [Name of Representative]:

I am writing to urge you to ensure that comprehensive sexual education is made mandatory to all New York public school children.

Research indicates that comprehensive sexual education is effective at curbing teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. In addition, comprehensive programs have been proven to reduce sexual violence, homophobic bullying and encourage the formation of healthy relationships.

Currently, our kids have no guarantee of receiving sexual education. There is also no oversight of curriculum, which means educational content may be outdated or biased.

A vast majority of New Yorkers – both Democrats and Republicans - share my support for comprehensive sexual education. Our children have the right to receive medically accurate, age-appropriate information that will protect their health and safety, and foster healthy relationships.

Now, more than ever, it is vital to promote gender equality starting from an early age when perspectives are formed. Please revisit the bill to require basic sex education in New York State public schools that is inclusive and based on science. I look forward to hearing from you on this most urgent and important matter.

Sincerely,
[Constituent name]
[Constituent phone number]
[Constituent email address]

Timeline

2025 Timeline for NYSED Sex Education Communication Campaign												
Task	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Project approvals and budget allocation	█											
Content creation/message development	█	█	█									
Website development		█	█	█								
Social media advertising (through mid-April 2026)				█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
Social media posting				█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
<i>Sex Ed for All</i> month					★							
PSA distribution					█			█			█	
Monitoring and strategy evaluation					█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
Evaluation of 2025 campaign; initial 2026 planning											█	█

Costs

The following table outlines a preliminary budget for a public relations campaign. The cost for social media advertising was estimated using online cost calculators. Website hub development costs were estimated using the median price of an estimate from Armia Systems, Inc., which included various features for the hub (including types of content, functionality and security).

Communications Tactic	Cost*
PSA Free distribution on select broadcast and/or print Social media distribution (NYSED and partner sites)	\$0
Social Media Advertising for one year on four platforms	\$12,600 (<i>How Much Does Social Media Marketing Cost in 2024?</i>)
Website Hub development costs	\$3,100 (<i>Website Development Cost Calculator, n.d.</i>)
TOTAL	\$15,700

*These costs do not include labor.

Campaign Evaluation

As this campaign is aimed at changing hearts and minds through CSE advocacy, tracking public awareness will be essential for measuring success (Weiner, 2024). In addition, as the ultimate campaign goal is to see a New York State CSE mandate enacted in the legislature, it will be important to determine whether the campaign inspires action. To keep expenditures low, monitoring of reach and engagement will be conducted using free tracking resources.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Three of the four social media platforms the campaign will utilize – Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram – are equipped with free analytics to track reach and engagement. Since its change in ownership, X (formerly known as Twitter) does not offer free analytics (Trendiction SA, 2024). However, Talkwater offers a free analytics tool for X that tracks hashtags, reach, engagement and sentiment, which the campaign will utilize (Trendiction SA, 2024).

Because the NYSED social media sites already have a good number of followers, campaign content will reach a good number of New York State residents. This does not, however, ensure that the target audiences (New York parents and youth) are taking the time to read or take action on content. Engagement must be measured to assess the impact of the campaign. Thus, the campaign will use engagement analytics (such as number of likes, shares and comments) to measure impact. As engagement rates are currently low on the NYSED social media channels, the campaign has a goal of increasing engagement to 1-3.5% (which is generally accepted as a “good” engagement rate) (*What is engagement rate and how to calculate it*, n.d.).

WEB

As NYSED is a state entity, the organization has access to the state IT department. The campaign will rely on IT to monitor the number of visits to the *NYSED Sex Ed* hub as well as the time spent on individual pages. It will also be important to measure whether web traffic is originating from social media or sites that publish one of the PSAs, so that the effectiveness of communication tools can be evaluated. In addition, IT can measure download rates of the resources provided. A measure of downloaded sample letter to state representative or letter to the editor will provide some indication of how effective the campaign is at driving advocacy. Ultimately, however, the passage of a CSE mandate will be the true measure of campaign success.

PSA

As a free form of advertising, media outlets do not necessarily provide analytics on PSA placement (Hampton, n.d.). To track PSA placement, the campaign will employ Google News Alert, a free tool that allows news monitoring by keywords across the internet (Google, n.d.). This will provide some limited information on where and when PSAs were placed.

2025 CAMPAIGN REPORTING

In addition to ongoing monitoring, the campaign will employ A/B testing to assess messaging and design. A/B testing “compares the performance of two versions of content to see which one appeals more to visitors/viewers” (*What is A/B testing?*, n.d.). Thus, the campaign will create multiple versions of PSAs and social media content to assess what is most effective.

Results from A/B testing, social media analytics and PSA tracking will be compiled at the end of 2025 into a media evaluation report that will inform future communication strategies. This report will attempt to determine who has been reached and whether they took action. Specifically, it will include:

- Media impressions (or viewer/listenership) of the PSA
- Social media reach and engagement
- Web hub visits and interaction
- Results from A/B testing
- Analysis of campaign strengths and weaknesses
- Suggestions for future communication strategies

In addition, Google Trends will be used to conduct an audit of searches in New York State for key CSE terms (e.g. sex education) (*Google trends*, n.d.). Using this tool, the campaign will be able to determine whether the conversation around CSE is trending (*Google trends*, n.d.). Trending topics may be influential in changing opinions and behaviors, and may lead to action.

In addition to various communication metrics, public health measures can be assessed in the long term. If successful, the campaign will result in a CSE mandate, which, in turn, should have an affect on public health as well as attitudes and behaviors influenced by gender norms. Measures may include a decrease in the rate of youth STIs and teen pregnancy, a decrease of reported acts of gender-based threats and/or violence, and an increase in the number of Gay-Straight Alliance clubs operating in New York schools.

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