

# REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

## THE PROBLEM

It is vital that our education system provide adolescents with the information, skills, and support they need to make informed choices about their sexuality, reproductive health, and relationships. Though comprehensive sexuality education has a proven positive impact on adolescent sexuality and health<sup>1</sup>, and may reduce bullying, intimate partner violence, and sexual harassment and assault, it is not consistently available in schools.

Many young people face particular obstacles to becoming empowered and healthy individuals. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender and gender non-conforming (LGBQ and TGNC) students face disproportionate rates of school victimization.<sup>2</sup> Young people account for half of all new sexually transmitted infections.<sup>3</sup>

In nearly half of all states, minors cannot consent to receive contraceptive services without parental involvement<sup>4</sup> and fewer than 15 percent of middle and high schools provide students with contraceptives either on site or through referrals.<sup>5</sup> Seventy-five percent of all pregnancies among girls ages 15–19 are unintended<sup>6</sup> and minors in most states are unable to access abortion without notifying a parent or guardian<sup>7</sup>, yet they also face stigma when they are pregnant and parenting.<sup>8</sup>

## THE SOLUTION

Because education is a local issue, and because the services and support young people need must be close to home and easily accessible, cities have a central role to play in ensuring that policies, resources, and values meet the specific needs of youth when it comes to sexuality and reproductive health care. Local governments can provide comprehensive sexuality education, support for young people who become pregnant or are parenting, and access to confidential and teen-friendly reproductive health care.

## POLICY ISSUES

**SUPPORT COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION:** One of the most important actions a municipality can take to ensure that students have the information they need is to mandate long-term, comprehensive sexuality education in the classroom.<sup>9</sup> To the extent possible, local officials should also work to ensure that sexuality education policies are mirrored in charter school curricula. Many school boards or departments of education can mandate age- and developmentally-appropriate, K-12, and LGBQ and TGNC-inclusive comprehensive sexuality education, as was done in **Chicago**.<sup>10</sup> City councils can support this process by holding public hearings that give young people an opportunity to tell their stories and describe their needs and engage other community members, as **New York** did in April 2017.<sup>11</sup> Evaluation standards establish accountability for implementation and make sure that the selected curriculum is meeting the needs of teachers and students and having a meaningful impact. In **Broward County, FL**, schools are required to report the number of students who participated in sex education courses each year.<sup>12</sup> In **Baltimore, MD**, the city received funding to hire a community-based organization to thoroughly evaluate the implementation of their sexuality education programming. Cities should ensure that school administration and teachers have adequate resources, including time and money, to implement policy changes in the classroom.

**SUPPORT COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS THAT EMPOWER YOUNG PEOPLE:** In many localities, community-based organizations are an important part of the fabric of daily life for young people, providing them with a range of necessary services in and out of the classroom. The **New York** City Council allocates funding annually to programs like TORCH, a peer education program that trains and pays teenagers to teach

after-school workshops on sexual and reproductive health, rights, and justice education, centering the experiences of black and brown youth.<sup>14</sup> These organizations can also be an important resource for LGBTQ and TGNC youth. In **Marion County, IN**, the Department of Child Services provides funding to the Indiana Youth Group, which provides support to LGBTQ youth in Indianapolis and beyond.<sup>15</sup>

**SUPPORT PREGNANT & PARENTING YOUTH:** Young people who become parents deserve support from their community, not shame. Cities can reflect these values by avoiding teen pregnancy prevention language or programming that stigmatizes young parents and their families, as well as by offering a range of services to pregnant and parenting teens.<sup>16</sup> In **Milwaukee, WI**, the Pregnant and Parenting Youth Program in two schools offers both young fathers and mothers, as well as pregnant students, support, including home or hospital instruction and case management to facilitate access to resources across the city.<sup>17</sup> In **Minneapolis, MN**, students have access to maternity leave as well as childcare on-site at four schools in the city.<sup>18</sup> California and New Mexico recognize “Day of Recognition for Young Parents” on August 25, and cities could consider establishing this as a day of recognition as well.<sup>19</sup>

**MAKE REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CARE ACCESSIBLE TO TEENS:** To overcome barriers like the need for confidentiality, lack of access to transportation, and limited income, cities need to be creative about how to get teens the health care they need. School-based health centers (SBHCs) offer age-appropriate, confidential care to students where they already are, and can be particularly important for vulnerable students, including those who are undocumented. Because they are often able to guarantee confidential care, SBHCs are an ideal point of care for family planning and reproductive health services. **Hillsboro, OR**’s school board voted to change their policy to allow the town’s SBHC to prescribe and dispense contraceptives to students. In **Baltimore, MD**, students are able to access many forms on contraception at SBHCs, including long-acting reversible contraception.<sup>21</sup> Another creative solution comes from the **Philadelphia** Department of Public Health, which has condoms available at sites across the city and will mail free condoms to students in a discreet package.<sup>22</sup>

## **LANDSCAPE AND RESOURCES**

**National Institute for Reproductive Health** provides funding and technical assistance to organizations and advocates working to advance reproductive health, rights and justice on the local level and connect officials with local youth-serving organizations. **Advocates for Youth** partners with young people to advocate for a more positive and realistic approach

to adolescent sexual health. **SIECUS** helps schools and communities adopt and implement comprehensive sex education and can provide up-to-date resources on adolescent sexuality. **Planned Parenthood** is a leader in providing comprehensive sex education to young people in classrooms across the country.

*Co-authored by the NIRH*

