

Chair Jason Lewis
Joint Committee on Education
State House Room 511-B
24 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02133

Chair Alice Peisch
Joint Commission on Education
State House Room 473-G
24 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02133

May 20, 2021

Re: Support for S.318, H.673 An Act Relative to Healthy Youth

Dear Chair Lewis, Chair Peisch, and Members of the Joint Committee on Education:

Fenway Health would like to go on the record IN SUPPORT of S.318, H.673 *An Act Relative to Healthy Youth*, and urges you to report this bill favorably.

Founded in 1971, the mission of Fenway Health is to enhance the wellbeing of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community and all people in our neighborhoods and beyond through access to the highest quality health care, education, research and advocacy. Motivated by the belief that healthcare is a right, not a privilege, Fenway Health serves over 30,000 patients. Our Sidney Borum Jr. Health Center in the South End and our Youth On Fire program in Cambridge serve young people, providing services ranging from healthcare to housing navigation to STI screening and testing.

An Act Relative to Healthy Youth will ensure that any health education provided by Massachusetts public schools will be comprehensive, medically accurate, age-appropriate, LGBTQ inclusive, and will cover consent. It will expand access to information that will empower young people to make smart choices about their health and well-being. As it stands, there is no consistency among health education programs in Massachusetts—some curricula are exemplary, but too many students are forced to make do with misleading or inaccurate information. The bill does not require public schools to provide health education, but rather ensures that students will not receive biased, incomplete, or incorrect information about sexual health. With comprehensive information about effective contraception use, pregnancy and STI prevention, and relationship and communication skills, students will have the tools they need to make informed decisions and keep themselves safe.

This bill will also provide comprehensive sex education that is inclusive of all gender identities and sexual orientations and recognizes LGBTQ youth health needs. This is especially crucial in sending a positive and affirming message to LGBTQ youth while also giving them information to combat the fact that LGBTQ youth are disproportionately impacted by STIs, sexual assault, and bullying.

On World AIDS Day 2016, the Massachusetts Getting to Zero Coalition released the [Massachusetts Comprehensive Plan to Eliminate HIV Discrimination, AIDS Related Deaths, and New HIV Infections](#). The plan highlights the importance of adopting sexual health as a human right, and supports the passage of this bill as a critical step towards Getting to Zero.

The CDC estimates that youth ages 15-24 account for almost half of the 26 million new sexually transmitted infections that occurred in the United States in 2018.¹ In Massachusetts, the number of cases of chlamydia in young people aged 15-19 has steadily increased since 2015, with 6,973 cases reported in 2019.² And in 2015,

¹ CDC. "Sexually Transmitted Infections Prevalence, Incidence, and Cost Estimates in the United States." <https://www.cdc.gov/std/statistics/prevalence-incidence-cost-2020.htm>

² "Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Bureau of Infectious Disease and Laboratory Sciences.

only 42% of sexually active Massachusetts adolescents reported using a condom the last time they had intercourse.³ These youth are at high risk for contracting HIV. The only way to counter these concerning trends is to increase access to information about sexuality and sexual health. Right now the lack of consistency in health education is leaving adolescents vulnerable to unintended pregnancy and HIV infection, among other STIs. This bill will close the information gap and lead to reduced rates of HIV infection and other unintended consequences.

Fenway Health is dedicated to stopping the spread of HIV not only through education about risk factors and safer sex, but also through encouragement of open dialogue between partners about HIV status, PrEP use, and testing. This bill will empower teens to learn how to communicate openly with potential sexual partners, reducing the spread of HIV and other STIs and laying the groundwork for healthy relationship practices that will continue to be beneficial well into adulthood.

On May 6th, after years of dedicated advocacy from community members, the Worcester School Committee voted to approve a curriculum model called “Rights, Respect, Responsibility,” which includes LGBTQ viewpoints and experiences. This victory for young people in Worcester is a breakthrough that should not be a rare event for students who happen to live in a district with dedicated advocates and resources to organize a huge community mobilization effort. Every student in the commonwealth deserves the hard won access to knowledge and information that the young people of Worcester will finally receive through comprehensive sex education.

While traveling across the state, visiting schools and publicizing AIDS Action’s AIDS Walk, I have been saddened and disturbed by the number of students who have no idea what HIV/AIDS is or how it is transmitted. A number of school officials once instructed me to refrain from talking about sex at all in my remarks to students about HIV/AIDS, because they had not received health education. But silence is not an effective public health strategy—for any conversation about sexuality and sexual health to be effective and empowering, it needs to be comprehensive and medically accurate. This bill is a vital step towards informational empowerment and making adolescents in Massachusetts safer and healthier.

Please give a favorable report to *An Act Relative to Healthy Youth* (S.318, H.673).

Sincerely,



Carl Sciortino
Executive Vice President of External Relations
Fenway Health

“2019 Integrated HIV/AIDS, STD, and Viral Hepatitis Surveillance Report.” <https://www.mass.gov/lists/std-data-and-reports>

³ CDC. “Massachusetts – 2015 State Health Profile.” https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/stateprofiles/pdf/massachusetts_profile.pdf.