

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 3, 2024

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Office of Governor
State of Florida, The Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

Honorable Manny Diaz, Jr.
Commissioner of Education Florida Department of
Education
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

Dear Governor DeSantis and Commissioner Diaz Jr.,

We write to address our severe concerns with your Department of Education's (DOE) abstinence-only directive to Florida public schools, and demand that your Administration rescind this harmful edict to ensure local school districts pursue comprehensive sexual education for the benefit of students across the state. Your Administration's unclear guidance and delayed, improper reviews of approved sexual education curriculums prevent students from making informed, healthy decisions about their sexual health. Abstinence-only programs have been consistently proven ineffective, damaging to students' health, and discriminatory against the LGBTQ+ community. This directive is another extremist attack on evidence-based, data-driven policies.¹

Under Florida law, schools must promote abstinence from sexual activity. However, they are not explicitly prohibited from properly instructing students on comprehensive and medically accurate curriculums.² Fortunately, many of our school districts do just that. However, due to DOE's recent verbal directive, all schools must now exclude these core topics from their sexual education courses: contraception, reproductive anatomy, and LGBTQ+ issues.³ In younger grade levels, schools were directed to remove mentions of consent, domestic violence, and abuse, even though the use of accurate language in sex education increases the likelihood a child will report abuse.⁴ Rather than offer proper instruction on how to protect students from sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancies, and sexual violence, your Administration promotes harmful, ignorant political ideologies that flout public health and fail to provide what parents want for their children.

Florida law also requires schools to submit their sexual education curriculum plans to the state DOE for approval.⁵ Since the law's enactment, school districts in Hillsborough, Orange, Polk, Broward, and Seminole Counties had been left for nearly a year without any approvals or feedback on the curriculum submitted to the DOE. Now, over a year later, school districts are reporting that the DOE has verbally instructed them to remove the topics outlined herein, rather than issue formal feedback or guidelines,⁶ leaving schools scrambling to revise their curriculums, or be forced to switch to a state-approved textbook. School districts deserve timely, formal guidance on constructing their curriculum and your actions have created major disruptions to our institutions and the students they serve. This level of guideline negligence by DOE is so egregious it can only be viewed as an intentional attempt to sabotage the teaching of healthy, science-based sex education programs.

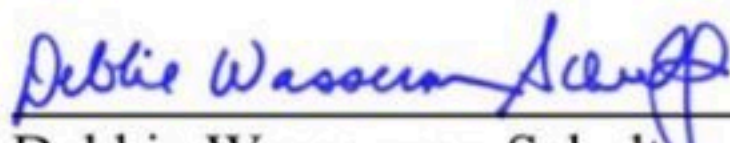
The state-approved abstinence-focused textbooks emphasize that the "only effective way to prevent STDs and pregnancy" is abstinence, and fail to mention contraception, or other vital sexual education topics crucial to

teenagers.⁷ As is well known, abstinence-only education by itself has long been shown to fail in delaying sexual intercourse or decrease other sexually risky behaviors.⁸ It also leads teens to seek information from unreliable sources, mainly the Internet. This Administration's policy basically abandons children and leaves them to rely on hallway speculation and internet misinformation for critical health knowledge. Unlike abstinence-only curriculums, widely published, science-based evidence shows that comprehensive sex education programs effectively reduce teen pregnancy, increase contraceptive use and reduce the transmission of HIV and other STI's, all without making it more likely for students to engage in sexual intercourse.⁹ Polling consistently shows this is exactly what a vast majority of parents want schools to teach.¹⁰ Data also shows that states with policies that stress abstinence actually often have higher rates of teenage pregnancy and births.¹¹

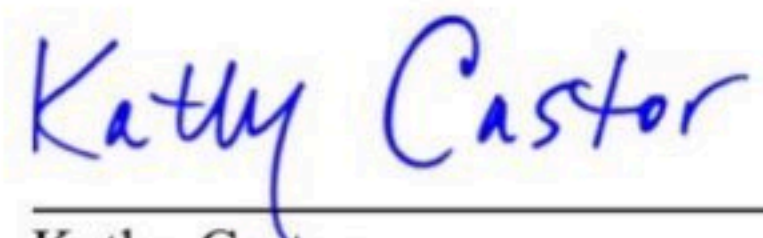
The state's new law and verbal directive also expels information on gender identity and LGBTQ+ information, allowing instruction only on heterosexual relationships. Again, this directive will harm and further stigmatize already at-risk students. As a recent article noted, "[a]bout two-thirds of LGBTQ youth, who already face more harassment and serious mental health challenges than other students, said that proposals at the state and local levels to ban the discussion of LGBTQ identities in schools 'made their mental health a lot worse.'"¹²

Florida law already allows parents to opt their children out of discussions on sexual education topics, meaning the DOE need not continue to interfere based on misguided, anti-data, policies. Contrary to your claims, this law does not give parents more rights regarding their child's education. Instead, it takes power from local educators and parents to decide the best educational materials for their students, and instead hands it to Tallahassee political appointees averse to science, facts or public health data. We therefore demand that your Administration and DOE rescind these harmful directives issued to our school districts that go way beyond state law and ensure local educators can teach the comprehensive sexual education curricula that parents want, and healthy students need.

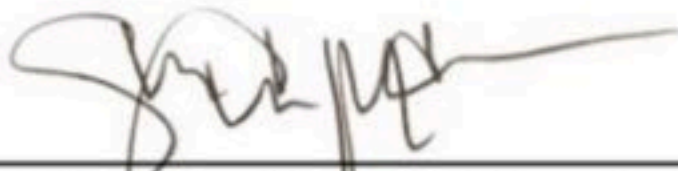
Sincerely,



Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Member of Congress



Kathy Castor
Member of Congress



Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick
Member of Congress



Lois Frankel
Member of Congress

⁷ Crosby, R. & Sims, N. (2024). <https://popular.info/p/florida-bans-instruction-on-contraception>

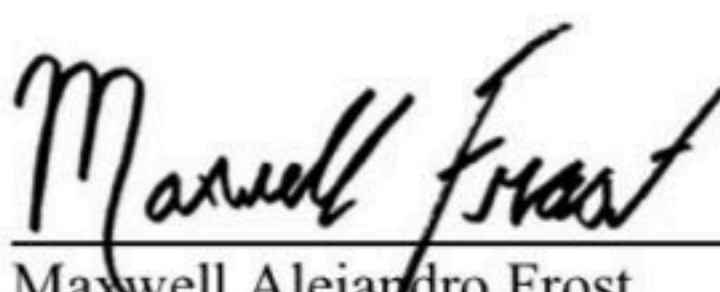
⁸ Kaiser Family Foundation (2018). <https://www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/fact-sheet/abstinence-education-programs-definition-funding-and-impact-on-teen-sexual-behavior/>

⁹ Stanger-Hall, K. F., & Hall, D. W. (2011). *Abstinence-Only Education and Teen Pregnancy Rates: Why We Need Comprehensive Sex Education in the U.S.* PLoS ONE, 6(10), e24658

¹⁰ Kantor L, Levitz N. *Parents' views on sex education in schools: How much do Democrats and Republicans agree?* PLoS One.

¹¹ CDC (2022). <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/teen-births/teenbirths.htm>

¹² Crosby, R. & Sims, N. (2024). <https://popular.info/p/florida-bans-instruction-on-contraception>



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