

# Expanding Districtwide Comprehensive Sexual Health Education to Pre-Kindergarten in the Chicago Public School District

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## Background

### CPS Sexual Health Education Policy

In 2013, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) passed a mandate for comprehensive sexual health education (SHE). SHE provides benefits to even the youngest school children. Research shows that SHE exposure to pre-K students can protect against child abuse and repeated educational opportunities allow students to master SHE skills over time.<sup>1,2</sup> Recognizing these benefits, CPS updated its SHE policy in 2020 to strengthen SHE requirements and require sexual health education to begin in pre-K. As a result, CPS schools now provide sexual health education to students in grades pre-K to 12.

### CPS SHE REQUIREMENTS: 2020 UPDATE

- Each year, pre-K through 12th grade teachers must provide all the lessons and topics outlined in CPS' sexual health education scope and sequence;<sup>3</sup>
- The district-provided SHE curriculum must be medically accurate, age-appropriate, comprehensive, and aligned with the National Sexuality Education Standards;<sup>3</sup>
- Schools must have at least two district-trained SHE instructors, one of which is a Special Education instructor;<sup>3</sup>
- Schools must provide at least three notifications to inform parents/guardians of upcoming SHE instruction, one of which must be a written hard copy notification.<sup>3</sup>

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## What Was Done to Understand Sexual Health Education Delivery in Pre-K Settings?

To better understand how SHE was being implemented in pre-K settings after the 2020 amended SHE policy, evaluators from the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) School of Public Health (SPH) Policy, Practice and Prevention Research Center (P3RC) conducted 14 virtual interviews with pre-K teachers between February and March 2022. The virtual interviews explored pre-K teachers' views of the SHE training and curriculum, as well as how they delivered and/or prepared to deliver the SHE curriculum.

## What is the Pre-K Sexual Health Education Training?

The pre-K SHE training is a mandatory, 20-minute, online, asynchronous training that provides pre-K teachers with an overview of the curriculum and policy, as well as general guidance on how to address student and parent questions and concerns. After completing the training, teachers are required to pass an assessment to access the pre-K curriculum.

## What Components of the SHE Training and Curriculum Did Pre-K Teachers Highlight?

Ten out of the 14 pre-K teachers had favorable perceptions of the training. The highlighted components included the training's length, early childhood focus, overview of the SHE policy and Erin's law,<sup>4</sup> rationale for teaching SHE, terminology, materials, and skills-based content (i.e., how to discuss sensitive topics with students and address parental concerns).

“...we never really had like super clear guidance on how to present this stuff with our students. I feel like a lot of things are always geared towards, you know, older students. So, it was nice to have something that was definitely targeted for our age group...It felt like it was worth the time because it pertained directly to us...”

—PRE-K TEACHER

Teachers who implemented the curriculum (8 teachers) felt it was detailed, had great scope and sequence, used appropriate terminology, aligned well with the CPS district's pre-K curriculum, *Creative Curriculum*,<sup>5,6</sup> and had great visuals and videos. However, five teachers felt that the length of some of the lessons and activities could be shortened.

## How Are Pre-K Teachers Implementing Sexual Health Education?

### Over half of pre-K teachers implemented the curriculum

Eight out of the 14 pre-K teachers were currently delivering or had completed delivery of the SHE curriculum to their students. Six had not yet implemented the curriculum.

### Variability in classroom support and schedule

There was variability in how teachers delivered the SHE lessons. While most teachers delivered the curriculum by themselves, a few indicated having co-taught (or intended to co-teach) with other staff (e.g., the school counselor, physical education teacher, or teaching assistants). Some teachers taught lessons at regular intervals (e.g., every day or two to three times a week) or intermittently.

### Implementation skills learned in SHE training extended to other classroom lessons and activities

The six teachers who had not delivered the SHE curriculum incorporated strategies and knowledge they learned from the training and curriculum into their other classroom activities.

## What Helped Pre-K Teachers Implement Sexual Health Education?

### Classroom Autonomy and Flexibility

Pre-K teachers were trained, and had classroom space and time to implement SHE. Pre-K teachers are well-positioned to deliver this curriculum because they have a fair amount of control over their time spent with their students and flexibility over how they deliver the content.

### Ease of Curriculum Integration

Pre-K teachers' access to district-provided, adaptable, and easy-to-integrate SHE curriculum made it easier for them to implement SHE. The SHE curriculum alignment with the CPS district's pre-K curriculum<sup>5,6</sup> allowed teachers to integrate SHE lessons into their existing curriculum. Teachers often used content from the district's pre-K curriculum<sup>5,6</sup> to reinforce SHE lessons.

### Established Trust with Parents

Pre-K teachers' relationship with their students' parents allowed parents to trust in their discretion when teaching SHE. Many pre-K teachers reported having an established relationship with parents due to their ongoing access to and regular communication with parents (e.g., frequent communication at drop off and pickup).

## What Are Opportunities for Increased Support and Improvement?

### Age-Appropriate Materials

Due to the age of their students, pre-K teachers need age-appropriate materials and resources for hands-on experiential

learning, such as dolls, puppets, games, etc. Pre-K teachers often requested classroom kits that included but were not limited to books, posters, videos, slide decks, puppets, dolls that feature human genitalia, and interactive games to help facilitate the curriculum's delivery to pre-K students.

### Resources for Students with Diverse Needs

Pre-K teachers need additional support and resources around teaching SHE to students of different developmental milestones, language, and cognitive abilities and in managing student reactions to the content. Pre-K teachers often requested additional training and support around addressing students' different learning styles, managing students' reactions to SHE content, and addressing and responding to students' disclosure of abuse, when teaching the curriculum.

“ I have some students who speak Spanish... but the two who are still learning English...because we don't normally say those terms, you may need it said in your language for them to kinda like really understand...like with the more pictures and posters too, it could kinda help ”

—PRE-K TEACHER

### Communication Guidance

Pre-K teachers need additional support around messaging and conveying the importance of SHE to parents. Teachers often spoke of discomfort and the need for additional training and resources, such as flow charts and talking points to use during parent-teacher discussions to convey the importance of SHE to parents.

### Parent Engagement Materials

For successful SHE programs in Pre-K settings, it is important to effectively engage parents and families. Teachers suggested providing materials to share with parents, as well as workshops and training to educate parents about SHE in pre-K. Some teachers recommended using another term instead of “sex education,” to help address parents' fears and discomfort around teaching this subject to pre-K students.

“ ... I feel like calling it sexual health [education] sounds like we're talking about intercourse, and I think that that's a little bit of a misnomer because that's not it... but I think that's what parents think about and they get worried... I would rather, they just call it like “health and safety” or like “our bodies” or something like that. ”

—PRE-K TEACHER

### Networking Opportunities

While opportunities for collaboration varied by school, all pre-K teachers report a strong desire for opportunities to collaborate, troubleshoot, and share effective practices with other SHE

instructors within their school and across the district (e.g., professional learning communities or communities of practice). The division between pre-K and K-8th grade made it difficult for pre-K teachers to collaborate with other SHE instructors. Teachers suggested CPS provide them more opportunities to collaborate with other teachers during the SHE training or create other opportunities for teachers to interact.

## UPDATE

The name of the Pre-K-5th grade curriculum was recently changed from “Sexual Health Education” to “Personal Health & Safety Education,” which was based on the findings from this study. This is reflected in the current SHE policy, which was recently updated in 2023.

For more information, see <https://www.cps.edu/sites/cps-policy-rules/policies/700/704/704-6/>

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## SUGGESTED CITATION

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