

July 14, 2020

To: Texas Education Agency and Texas State Board of Education

From: Suzi Kennon, President, Texas PTA

Re: Health Education Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) Workgroup E Draft

Texas Parent Teacher Association (Texas PTA), the largest child advocacy association in the state representing over 500,000 members, is grateful for your unwavering service and applauds your commitment to public education during these uncertain times. Texas PTA acknowledges the challenges that a global pandemic poses, and appreciates the opportunity for continued public commentary and stakeholder input. As each of us continue to care for the health of our own families and children, Texas PTA recognizes that we must also look ahead to the future health of Texas students.

At its core, Texas PTA's purpose is to promote the welfare of children and youth at home, school, places of worship, and throughout the community; to advocate for laws that further the education, physical and mental health, welfare, and safety of children and youth; to promote the collaboration and engagement of families and educators in the education of children and youth; and to engage the public in united efforts to secure the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social well-being of all children and youth. As such, Texas PTA recognizes that the revision of the Health Education Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) is of paramount importance to the wellbeing of all youth in Texas.

In the aggregate, Texas PTA is supportive of the most recent Workgroup E draft which is significantly stronger than workgroup D draft. We are pleased to see the medically-accurate, evidence-driven standards focused on the physical and mental wellbeing of all students found in Workgroup E. If another workgroup is to be convened, we strongly encourage that the language found in Workgroup E be maintained, with suggested recommendations found below.

In a survey conducted in May 2020, Texas PTA sought the perspectives of its members on a variety of topics, including sexual and reproductive health education in schools. The response rate was the highest of any survey conducted by Texas PTA since the association began to use this method to better understand their members' views. You will see the results of this survey related to sex education below.

- I. **Texas PTA supports standards that include factual and data-driven information about contraception, prevention of STIs and healthy relationships, taught in an age-appropriate manner.**

*When asked, “Do you believe sex education should be taught in schools,” **an overwhelming 87.64%, of Texas PTA survey respondents answered ‘yes’.***

Texas PTA, in alignment with the Texas Medical Association (TMA) and Texas Pediatric Society (TPS), supports sex education that addresses contraception, prevention of sexually transmitted infections, and the identification of healthy and unhealthy relationships. As health education courses are not required at the high school level, Texas PTA supports the inclusion of these student expectations in middle school so that all students will receive a base of knowledge they will be able to rely upon as they grow into adulthood.

#### **Topic Area: Abstinence and Contraception**

Texas PTA supports the recommendations of TMA and TPS:

- Supports the addition of new student expectations at Grades 7-8 and Health 1 to identify and describe various contraceptive methods;
- Add more student expectations on contraception and other reproductive health choices while still keeping the majority of TEKS weighted toward abstinence. Understanding that TEKS must conform to language in TEC Chapter 28.004 (e)(1-5) requiring instruction “devote more attention to abstinence from sexual activity than any other behavior.” In the present draft, there are four separate strands of TEKS each beginning at Grade 6 related to abstinence and one required standard related to contraception in Grade 7-8. We wonder if the heavy relative weight toward abstinence could lead to an imbalance of instructional time spent on contraception and other reproductive health choices.
- Improve medical accuracy of TEKS related to emotional benefits of abstinence with this phrasing, “Explain that sexual activity and risk-taking in order to cope with emotional problems can indicate someone is not receiving the social and emotional support they need, and propose alternate coping strategies to early sexual initiation.”

#### **Topic Area: Sexually Transmitted Infections**

*Texas PTA parents were asked, “Along with teaching abstinence as the safest way to avoid unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, should sex education in public schools provide medically accurate information about topics such as contraception, prevention of sexually transmitted infections, and healthy relationships in 8th grade and higher?”*  
**91.37% of respondents were supportive of this type of education in the classroom.**

Texas PTA supports the recommendations of TMA and TPS:

- Use of the clinically correct term, “sexually transmitted infections” (STIs) instead of “sexually transmitted diseases”;
- Emphasize the importance of prevention methods and treatment for STIs
- The grade 7-8 standard should
  - List the signs and symptoms of the most prevalent STDs/STIs for which students are most at risk, including HPV and HIV/AIDS; and
  - List the STIs currently named in the Health 1 elective student expectation, including HPV, HIV/AIDS, chlamydia, gonorrhea, and herpes. Omitting the complete list of infections from the standards or only listing them in elective high school classes removes assurance they will be included in instruction for all students.

**II. Texas PTA supports standards that use de-stigmatizing language and that are specifically designed to help students be mentally strong and prepared to cope with personal challenges, and identify healthy and unhealthy relationships.**

Approximately one out of every five children has a mental health condition. Many of these mental health conditions will manifest by age 14. In 2019, Texas PTA advocated for and the Texas Legislature passed a law to provide students and educators with resources and training on mental health and substance abuse. A component of the legislation dealt with increasing the duties of the local School Health Advisory Council (SHAC) to make recommendations for policies, procedures, strategies, and curriculum to deal with the issue of youth suicide; to recommend appropriate grade levels and methods of instruction for healthy relationships education; and to recommend strategies to increase parental awareness regarding risky behaviors and early warning signs of suicide risks and behavioral health concerns.

**Topic Area: Social-Emotional Development, Self-Regulation, and Self-Esteem**

Texas PTA supports the addition of student expectations beginning in Kindergarten to promote social-emotional development, emotional regulation, and positive self-concept.

**Topic Area: Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships**

Identifying and navigating healthy and unhealthy relationships are critical skills throughout a student’s childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood. Even at the youngest ages, students are faced with the challenges of both flourishing and broken friendships, respecting the bounds of a teacher-student relationship, and setting personal boundaries and respecting the wishes of others. Workgroup E’s draft removes several TEKS in Kindergarten through Grade 5 surrounding communicating personal boundaries, practicing refusal skills, and notifying a trusted adult when made to feel uncomfortable or unsafe by another person. The draft notes these strands were

removed because they are addressed in other strands, such as Injury, Violence Prevention, and Safety and Reproductive and Sexual Health.

Friendships, familial relations, or student-teacher relationships all have the potential to be healthy or unhealthy; and these relationships are not only an example by which youth will model their own relationships, but also play a significant role in the mental health and wellbeing of a child. Recognizing that not all relationships are romantic in nature, Texas PTA recommends re-inserting these student expectations in Kindergarten through Grade 4. These expectations should also include appropriate ways to respond when faced with an unhealthy relationship. We encourage aligning these standards with standards on personal boundaries in romantic relationships that begin at Grade 5.

### **III. Texas PTA supports the inclusion of information about immunizations.**

#### **Topic Area: Immunizations and Infection Control**

Texas PTA, in alignment with the Texas Medical Association and Texas Pediatric Society, supports the addition of immunizations to student expectations on infectious disease prevention. We recommend adopting Workgroup E's stronger immunization language, with minor revisions to increase the complexity of student expectations each year. Additionally, we recommend inserting specific examples of vaccine-preventable diseases directly in the student expectations at intermediate grades, such as influenza, measles, and human papillomavirus (HPV).

### **IV. Texas PTA supports education aimed at protecting children and youth from the exploitation and victimization of human trafficking.**

Texas PTA strongly supports the addition of TEKS on human trafficking at Grade 4 and continuing through high school.

### **V. In an effort to reduce tobacco use by youth, Texas PTA supports education relating to the harmful effects of both vaping and traditional tobacco products.**

Through our legislative advocacy to raise the age to purchase tobacco in Texas, Texas PTA is acutely aware of the misinformation surrounding the risks of vaping. In 2019, Texas PTA, in conjunction with American Heart Association (AHA), hosted our first annual *Straight Talk: A Matter of Life & Breath* forum, where students, parents, health professionals, and school administrators gathered to share their personal experiences with vaping. Student testimonials made clear a belief among the majority of youth that vaping is a healthy alternative to

cigarettes, is non-addictive, and does not contain nicotine. Many of these students battled addiction and withdrawal due to vaping.

The Texas School Safety Center (TxSSC), a partner of Texas PTA's, has created the Say What! Program. Say What! began in 2010 when the Texas Department of State Health Services partnered with the Texas School Safety Center to develop and maintain a youth advocacy movement to work in coordination with existing youth tobacco prevention efforts across the state. Since then, efforts have focused on reducing tobacco use across the state through local projects and Say What! resources.

**Topic Area: Physical and Mental Harms of Dangerous Substances, Illegal Drugs, Alcohol and Tobacco**

Texas PTA has seen an outcry from parents, school administrators, and legislators regarding the recent uptick in vaping among students. Currently, Workgroup E's draft has listed vaping as an optional example of a dangerous substance that could be taught in the classroom.

While Texas PTA supports the addition of vaping to student expectations in Grades 1-8, in alignment with the Texas Medical Association (TMA) and Texas Pediatric Society (TPS), we recommend solidifying vaping as a required instructional element within the TEKS.

Texas PTA also recommends that the TEKS not refer to vaping as a "current trend," as it minimizes this dangerous action and falsely presumes that vaping is on the decline or will decline in the near future. There is no evidence to suggest this. Texas PTA recommends, in alignment with the Texas Medical Association (TMA) and Texas Pediatric Society (TPS), including standards that would inform students about the Say What! program and connect them with resources on prevention, peer pressure, and treatment.