SEXUAL HEALTH LITERACY IS A HUMAN RIGHT, SO WHY DO WE ONLY TALK ABOUT IT AS AN EDUCATION ISSUE?

School-based sexual health programs and classes are required in only 31 states and the District of Columbia, and only 4 states require lessons to affirmatively recognize different sexual orientations and gender identities. What about youth who are removed from their homes and placed in systems like child welfare or juvenile detention centers, and the resulting school disruption? What is available to youth in foster care and detention facilities, where youth at greatest risk often find themselves?

Youth of color and LGBTQ youth are over-represented in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, where they are likely to experience violence and abuse. Without inclusive sexual health care and literacy programs that normalize an understanding of gender, gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation, LGBTQ youth in state custody will continue to experience violence and to feel powerless to report it.

YOUNG PEOPLE NEED AND DESERVE BETTER.

Access to sexual health information offers young people the foundation for healthy decisions about their sexual and reproductive health as adolescents and into adulthood. This health care is essential for youth in state custody who rely on the state to provide the basic health services and programs they need.

WE OWE YOUNG PEOPLE REAL SEXUAL HEALTH SERVICES THAT INCLUDE:

- Health care that reflects the possibility a child has experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse and that affirms the full spectrum of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.
- Sessions and discussions on anatomy, the meaning of consent, personal safety, healthy relationships, pregnancy options and birth control, and the prevention, symptoms, and treatment of sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy.
- Relationships with informed, trustworthy health professionals who are responsive to the needs of all young people in their care and committed to helping them resolve stress and insecurities about their bodies, emotions, and feelings.

Youth involved in the child welfare system are 53.8% youth of color and 19.1% LGBTQ. Youth involved in the juvenile justice system are 38% youth of color and 20% LGBTQ.
Sexual health literacy is smart medical, adolescent, and public health policy.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?
Endorse the SHYAC Consensus Statement and consider applying to join SHYAC in the fight to advocate for laws and policies that guarantee:

- Young people in state custody have access to sexual health care and literacy programs.
- Comprehensive training for all staff in institutions that house youth to ensure they know and protect the rights of all youth in their care, and adequately respond to their sexual and reproductive health care needs.
- Find out what written policies your state and county have for sexual health literacy programs for youth in their custody. If they don’t have any, ask them to take action.

THE MOST POWERFUL ADVOCATES ARE THOSE WITH DIRECT EXPERIENCE.

However, many young people with direct experience with state intervention may lack opportunities and resources to safely self-advocate. Consider how you can empower young people within your existing programs, including by providing advocacy trainings, creating an advisory network, or supporting youth-led campaigns in person or through your social media presence. Incorporate into your advocacy calls for comprehensive, inclusive sexual health services and education for all young people, including those in juvenile detention and foster care.

Visit SHYAC.org to read and endorse our Consensus Statement and to access resources from our coalition members, including national and local child welfare, juvenile justice, sexual and reproductive health, and LGBTQ rights organizations.