



IN OLYMPIA

Senate passes bill requiring comprehensive sex-ed in public schools

The curriculum would emphasize consent and sexual violence prevention

By Cameron Sheppard

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OLYMPIA — A proposed law to require school districts to implement a comprehensive sexual education curriculum emphasizing healthy relationships and consent was passed after a 28-21 vote by the state Senate on Jan. 22.

If signed into law, Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5395 would require every public school to offer evidence-informed, medically accurate and age-appropriate sex education as an integral part of the curriculum for kindergarten through 12th grade by Sept 1, 2021.

The bill was first introduced in 2019 and drew vocal opposition from parents, as well as support during public hearings, held that year. It stalled before the end of the legislative session and Senate Democrats re-introduced and passed it on Jan. 22. It heads now to the House. No Republican senators voted in favor of the legislation, and Sen. Tim Sheldon, D-Potlatch, voted against the measure.

Much of the language of the bill emphasizes a focus on teaching

affirmative consent and behaviors to reduce the risk of sexual assault and coercion. The bill also specifies that the curriculum must be inclusive to all protected classes. It also stipulates that the curricula will include both abstinence and other methods of avoiding unplanned pregnancy and sexually-transmitted diseases.

“It is about safety, first and foremost,” said Sen. Claire Wilson, D-Federal Way, a prime sponsor of the bill.

Wilson said this kind of education will help young people make better decisions to avoid the medical and economic consequences of sexually-transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancy and sexual violence. Republican senators argued that this bill is an overstep of state power and would erode the local control of school boards to implement a curriculum that best fits their respective communities.

Sen. Shelly Short, R-Addy, said this legislation does not respect the will of the parents who may want to teach their children about sexual health on their own, outside of the public classroom.

Many Republicans, such as Sen. Mike Padden, R-Spokane Valley, claimed that the majority of parents in their districts were not in favor of this bill.

“I think it is imposing values from the largest city to our whole state,” Padden asserted.

The legislation includes provisions that would allow parents to submit written requests to school administrations if they wish for their child to be excused from sexual education courses.

The bill will move on to the House, which holds a Democratic majority.



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