

Sexuality Education at Risk: Implications of the Proposed Swedish School Reform

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Commentary

Abstract

Sexual and reproductive health (SRH) is a central component of Sweden's public health objectives and its international commitments under Agenda 2030. Since 1955, sexuality education has been compulsory in Swedish schools to promote SRH, and is today embedded within the school's overarching goals and mission through a cross-curriculum approach. In 2025, the Swedish government proposed a new curriculum reform that would remove sexuality education from these goals and discontinuing the principal's coordinating responsibility. This commentary analyzes the reform from a public health perspective, with particular attention to its implications on young people's access to SRH. The analysis indicates that sexuality education contributes to improved SRH outcomes, a safer and more inclusive school climate, and more favorable conditions for learning. Conversely, the reform risks weakening structural coherence and coordinated implementation, thereby reintroducing disparities in teaching quality between schools. Such a development would undermine equal access to high-quality sexuality education and its associated SRH benefits. Repositioning sexuality education may also weaken Sweden's international credibility as an SRH advocate and hinder global efforts to achieve objectives outlined in Agenda 2030. To safeguard young people's access to SRH and enable schools to continue fulfilling this essential role, this commentary suggests that any revision of the Swedish curriculum should prioritize strengthened coordination, clarify the allocation of responsibilities, and align with international guidance on sexuality education.

Key Words: Sexual and Reproductive Health, Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), Curriculum Reform, Swedish School System, Health Equity

Introduction

Sexual and reproductive health (SRH) is defined as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality and reproduction. It also implies the ability to engage in safe and satisfying sexual relationships, while exercising autonomy over reproductive decisions [1]. In Sweden, the promotion of SRH through sexuality education has long been recognized as a prerequisite for young people's healthy development [2]. Admittedly, according to the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU), sexuality education has on several occasions encountered resistance, particularly from religious actors criticizing its approach to sexuality and the inclusion of topics such as condom use and homosexuality [3]. Nevertheless, others have argued that schools have a responsibility to provide sexuality education that meets students' needs. For instance, it has been suggested that when schools fail to provide such education, young people tend to rely on peers or mass media as primary sources of knowledge, the latter of which are alleged to provide information shaped by commercial interests rather than by young people's needs for reliable guidance [2]. At the same time, recurring calls to improve sexuality education have emerged over the years, often driven by concerns about the quality of teaching in relation to societal challenges linked to sexuality [4]. As a result, the curriculum has been revised several times to strengthen teaching [5].

In September 2025, the Swedish government announced a proposal of a new school reform, set to take effect in the autumn semester of 2026. Presented as the most extensive school reform in more than three decades, the reform includes

proposals for a new grading system, a reformed teacher education programme, and a new curriculum. According to the government, the initiative aims to ensure a school of high quality and address growing concerns related to bullying, insecurity, and declining reading proficiency [6]. However, the proposed curriculum has been strongly criticized by RFSU, describing it as the worst attack on sexuality education in modern times. RFSU also argues that the reform risks undermining decades of progress and failing to meet young people's needs, thereby endangering their health and leaving them more vulnerable to sexual violence and abuse [7].

Good and equal SRH forms part of the Swedish national public health objectives [8] and is also embedded in several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under the United Nations' Agenda 2030, including Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3), Quality Education (SDG 4), and Gender Equality (SDG 5) [9]. The importance of such efforts is further underscored by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Sweden in 1990 and incorporated into national law in 2020 [10], and which emphasizes children's right to access information and education that support their health and well-being [11]. Examining the proposed curriculum is therefore essential to ensure that changes do not inadvertently undermine these objectives and commitments and compromise young people's access to SRH. Despite strong reactions [7], however, this has not yet been fully reviewed. This commentary aims to address this gap by analyzing the proposal from a public health perspective, drawing on government investigations, national school inspection reports, peer-reviewed research, and international guidance on sexuality education.

The commentary first situates sexuality education within the Swedish educational context and briefly outlines the proposed curriculum reform. It then analyzes the proposed curriculum's implications for equal access to high-quality sexuality education as a determinant of SRH, both within and beyond Sweden's national context. Finally, it provides recommendations for reform efforts that could help ensure young people's access to SRH while enabling schools to continue fulfilling this essential role.

Sexuality Education in Sweden Today

Sexuality education has been part of the Swedish school system for over a century [5]. In 1955, Sweden became the first country in the world to introduce compulsory sexuality education for all students. Today, Sweden is described as one of the countries working most extensively with sexuality education [12] and has established a strong international role in advocating for SRH. For example, Sweden is actively engaged within the United Nations systems, including programs that promote sexuality education [13]. Sweden has also contributed financially to the development of the International technical guidance on sexuality education (Guidance), which provides evidence-based recommendations for the design and implementation of comprehensive sexuality education programmes aimed at supporting the objectives of Agenda 2030 [14]. Since sexuality education became compulsory, considerable differences in teaching quality have been observed both within and between schools. To address these disparities, the National Agency for Education recommended clearer objectives and a more integrated cross-curriculum approach. These recommendations were implemented in

2011 through the introduction of a new curriculum [4,5]. As part of this reform, sexuality education was integrated into the school's over-arching goals and mission and incorporated into a broader range of courses than previously, ensuring that all students encounter sexuality education issues repeatedly and from multiple perspectives throughout their schooling. This reform also assigned principals responsibility for ensuring cohesion and coordination, while designated subjects contribute to sexuality education from their respective areas of expertise. The content has also expanded from a primary focus on reproduction, sexually transmitted infections, and contraceptives to include broader themes such as sexuality, consent, and relationships. In addition, teaching is expected to follow a norm-conscious approach, ensuring that the language and content is relevant and inclusive for all students, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. Moreover, in 2022, the designation of sexuality education was changed from "Sex and Cohabitation" to "Sexuality, Consent and Relationships" to better emphasize communication, mutuality, and consent, while also providing students with a broader understanding of sexuality and relationships [4,5].

The Proposed Curriculum Reform

The proposed curriculum reform is informed by a government inquiry that has examined shortcomings in the structure and implementation of the 2011 curriculum. In its report, the inquiry argues that the curriculum contains extensive repetitions of objectives and content across subjects and sections, resulting in overlapping responsibilities and lack of clarity in implementation which makes it difficult for teachers to assume clear responsibility. The inquiry further claims that the integration

of sexuality, consent, and relationships, alongside other themes, has reinforced these repetitions and thereby contributed to an overload of the school's mandate. On this basis, it connects sexuality education to the declining reading proficiency and recommends removing it from the school's overarching goals and mission. Instead, it contends that the curriculum should more clearly define the school's academic focus, explained as teaching students to read, write, and count. It also expresses skepticism toward the cross-curriculum organization and advocates a return to the pre-2011 structure. Additionally, it proposes that responsibility for coherence and coordination should no longer rest with principals, leaving each teacher individually responsible for implementation in their own course [15].

Why Sexuality Education Matters

The inquiry might be right, perhaps the integration of sexuality education into the school's overarching goals and mission has contributed to an overload of the school's mandate. If so, this could help explain why inspections report that Swedish schools still struggle to provide sexuality education that is coherent, well-coordinated, and continuous, as well as why several key themes, such as honour-related violence and oppression, are insufficiently addressed and rarely revisited. It has also been reported that the teaching is often perceived as superficial. For example, students have stated that consent is emphasized as an important principle, but without being given concrete or practical meanings [16].

However, in contrast to the governmental inquiry's reasoning, researchers have highlighted that health and learning are

closely interconnected, emphasizing that healthier students generally achieve better academic outcomes than less healthier students. Conversely, they argue that health-related problems may limit motivation and learning capacity, resulting in poorer academic performance [17]. This perspective aligns with documented challenges within Swedish schools, where aspects of the school climate have been reported to negatively affect students' safety, mental health, and learning outcomes. For example, sexual offences and physical sexual violations occur to a significant extent, alongside derogatory language, jokes, and jargon linked to sexism and homophobia. Bullying and degrading treatments are also common causes of school absence, thereby limiting students' opportunities to complete their schooling successfully [16,18]. At the same time, research indicates that sexuality education can contribute to reduced homophobic attitudes, lower levels of bullying and harassment, and increased safety in the school environment [19]. Yet, despite this, schools' effort to integrate these issues into sexuality education are often reported as limited and insufficient [16].

Beyond its potential to improve the school climate, research also demonstrates that sexuality education is associated with a broad range of positive SRH outcomes among young people. For instance, it has been associated with increased knowledge of consent and sexual rights, fewer unintended pregnancies, and a lower prevalence of sexually transmitted infections. It has also been linked to more equal and healthy relationships, reduced use of alcohol and drugs in sexual contexts, and reductions in sexual violence and harassment [19].

Potential Implications of the Curriculum Reform

Ensuring that all students can benefit from the positive outcomes associated with sexuality education requires equal access to high-quality teaching [17,19]. Variation in the quality of sexuality education between schools was, in fact, a central reason why it was originally integrated into the school's overarching goals and mission [4,5]. By altering this governance structure, the proposal therefore risks reintroducing these disparities, thereby weakening the conditions for equal access. In addition, evidence from Sweden indicates that teaching quality tends to be higher when principals have clear responsibility for coordination and organizational conditions [5,16], suggesting that removing these responsibilities from principals could undermine the quality of teaching even further. Within this context, it is also important to note that the absence of a comprehensive approach has previously been shown to leave students with insufficient knowledge, limiting their ability to recognise or respond to unsafe or sexually violent situations [16]. As students already perceive the teaching as superficial [16], this development clearly fails to meet their needs. Consequently, this may lead them to seek information from alternative sources, increasing the risk of exposure to inaccurate or non-evidence-based information [2].

If implemented, the proposed curriculum reform may also have implications beyond Sweden's national context. As Sweden has historically positioned itself as a strong international advocate for SRH [13,14], it functions as a key actor in shaping international norms and standards in this field. Repositioning sexuality education away from the school's overarching goals and

mission may therefore raise questions regarding the coherence between Sweden's international commitments and its national educational governance. If this appears to diverge from the principles Sweden promotes internationally, it could create a perception that its rights-based rhetoric is not fully reflected in practice, potentially weakening its credibility as a global advocate for SRH.

At the same time, sexuality education is not yet universally accepted or implemented worldwide [20]. Although approximately 85 percent of countries report having policies supporting sexuality education, significant gaps remain between these commitments and what is actually reflected in national curricula. Furthermore, 71 percent of young people aged 15–24 actively seek sexuality education and related information online [21], indicating both a substantial demand for such knowledge and shortcomings in education systems. If other countries were to interpret Sweden's reform as a signal that the structural prioritization of sexuality education is negotiable, this could risk slowing global progress toward strengthening equal access to SRH as well as the achievement of the objectives outlined in Agenda 2030 [9].

A More Appropriate Curriculum Reform

That said, this commentary does not argue that the curriculum should be immune to revision. The documented shortcomings in sexuality education clearly indicate a need for improvement. Also, if the challenges within the school environment are not adequately addressed, they can over time, contribute to increased risk of mental ill health, unemployment, substance abuse, and other risk behaviors [16]. However, weakening the structural position of sexuality education and dis-

continuing the principal's coordinating responsibility is unlikely to be the most appropriate response, as such changes risk jeopardizing young people's equal access to high-quality sexuality education [4,5,16] and, consequently, the positive outcomes associated with it [17,19]. In addition, these changes could undermine national and international objectives and commitments [8,9,10]. Instead, a more appropriate reform would be to focus on strengthening structural cohesion and clarifying the allocation of responsibilities, thereby addressing the documented challenges related to lack of coherence and superficial implementation [16] and helping to safeguard the positive outcomes associated with effective sexuality education [17,19].

Moreover, in order to fulfill the commitments under Agenda 2030 and ensure that Sweden follow the principles it promotes internationally, any revisions to the curriculum should be guided by the Guidance. The Guidance emphasizes that sexuality education should be delivered through structured curriculum-based programmes with clearly defined health objectives grounded in research. It further stresses that curriculum development should draw on multidisciplinary expertise in areas such as human sexuality, pedagogy, public health, and human rights, and, where such expertise is limited, involve consultation with specialists in child and adolescent development [14]. Reviews likewise highlight that political decision-makers need to understand the significance of sexuality education, and that clear national guidelines are crucial for ensuring quality and equal implementation [20].

Limitations

This commentary is based on secondary sources and presents an interpretative and

exploratory analysis and do not provide original empirical research. In addition, the analysis focuses on the Swedish educational context, which may limit the generalizability to other educational systems or policy environments. Since the proposed curriculum has not yet been implemented, this commentary only discusses expected rather than observed implications. Empirical research will be needed to evaluate its actual effects.

Conclusion

This commentary analyzes the proposed curriculum reform from a public health perspective, focusing on young people's access to SRH. The analysis shows that sexuality education promotes improved SRH outcomes, healthier and more inclusive school climate, and more favorable conditions for learning. The proposed curriculum reform, however, risks reintroducing disparities in access to high-quality sexuality education, thereby weakening the conditions for young people to benefit equally from the positive SRH outcomes associated with it. It may also weaken Sweden's role as an international advocate for SRH and hinder global efforts to ensure equal access worldwide. To safeguard young people's access to SRH, this commentary suggests that any revisions of the Swedish curriculum should prioritize strengthening structural cohesion and clarifying the allocation of responsibilities, while remaining fully aligned with international guidance on sexuality education. By doing so, reform efforts can support, rather than compromise, equal access to high-quality sexuality education, while also enabling schools to continue fulfilling this essential role. This, in turn, would reinforce Sweden's credibility as a global advocate for SRH and contribute to the achievement of the objectives outlined in Agenda 2030.

*Comprehensive sexuality education in Sweden has had different designations over time. For the sake of simplicity, sexuality education has been used as the designation in this text.

Data Availability Statement

This commentary does not report new research data. All information discussed is derived from publicly available sources, previously published literature, or the author's own perspectives and analysis. Relevant references have been cited within the manuscript.

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Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

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Disclaimer

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