



WISE Colorado Case Study:

Engaging Communities to Advance Sex Education in Schools

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Introduction

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A person wearing a denim jacket and a backpack is shown from the chest down. They are holding a stack of books in their left hand and adjusting a cord in their right hand. The background is a blurred outdoor setting. The image has a blue tint and a dark blue horizontal bar at the top.

The WISE Initiative

Established in 2008, WISE is a national initiative dedicated to Working to Institutionalize Sex Education – so that sex education is part of schools' ongoing curricula. The goals of the WISE initiative are to 1) advance school-based sex education programs by supporting targeted implementation efforts, and 2) expand the field's body of knowledge related to best practices for institutionalizing sex education. WISE has included funding partners in 13 states since the start of the initiative.

Purpose of This Case Study and Methods

This case study highlights the work of WISE Colorado, led by Trailhead Institute, to advance sex ed through community engagement. It explores districts' impetus for prioritizing sex ed, the lessons learned about key steps for authentically engaging communities around sex ed, successes achieved through community engagement, and strategies for mitigating issues driven by fear of controversy. This case study is designed to support districts across the country in community engagement strategies for bringing high-quality sex ed to young people in their schools.

Learning for Action conducted nine interviews with Trailhead WISE staff and with stakeholders from five school districts across the state. Districts represented different geographies, including rural and urban districts, and included a spectrum of liberal to conservative districts. District stakeholders included district and school staff, administrators, and sex ed leads based in local non-profits that work in partnership with school districts.



WISE Colorado's Approach to Community Engagement

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Why is community engagement a priority?

Sex ed champions in WISE school districts and WISE Colorado's Trailhead leads recognize that community engagement is essential for changing the sex ed landscape in schools. Achieving parent/guardian support and district leadership commitment creates the social and political power to change policies and practices. Equally important is engaging young people to share opinions about the information they most need to learn and the conditions that best facilitate their learning. Through an inclusive engagement processes, communities can unite with the shared goal of supporting young people to have the information and skills they need for their comprehensive wellness and development.

How does WISE Colorado approach community engagement?

WISE Colorado prioritizes community engagement in its partnerships with school districts across the state to advance sex ed in schools. Cultivating support for and commitment to sex ed is done most effectively when local leaders champion the efforts, and sustainability requires building support and capacity locally. WISE Colorado leads identify their role as experts in sex ed from content, to policy, to training and technical assistance. As process facilitators they guide, support, build strength, and share resources with school districts. They have learned through their work across the state that advancing sex ed in schools hinges on building community support and championship, and that doing this is best achieved by leading from behind.

WISE Colorado leads foster locally-led community engagement through deep investments of relationship and trust building. They get to know each community's unique character, including their values, assets, and aspirations. They look to their local partners as experts in their own communities.



What sparked school districts' decisions to prioritize sex ed?

District and community champions in WISE Colorado school districts undertook efforts to address sex ed for three primary reasons:

1 Sex ed curriculum and teaching practices were non-existent, outdated, or inadequate. While some districts already provided sex ed for young people, others provided very little – and what they did provide was often not comprehensive, fact-based, or aligned with students' needs. Districts used aged curricula and teachers needed more training to have the knowledge, skills, and comfort to teach students effectively. For example, one district described using a curriculum from the 1980s; another district remembers the only sex ed lessons occurring in the final days of the school year, leaving students without space or time to ask questions.

2 Young people advocated for education. In two districts, sex ed champions gathered input from young people about what they thought their health and sex education needs were. Young people emphasized the importance of receiving both factual and skill-oriented sex education that talked not only about biology and prevention, but also about social emotional wellbeing and healthy relationships. Young people also underscored the need for sex ed to be inclusive of all identities.

3 Incidents with students highlighted a need for sex education and created a sense of urgency among district leaders, teachers, and parents/guardians. Some districts were prompted to address sex ed because of issues of bullying, consent, and young students saying things on the playground that sparked teacher and parent/guardian concern. These incidents raised awareness among school district leadership, staff, and parents/guardians that students needed better education and that sex education needed to be inclusive and comprehensive.

District champions connected with WISE Colorado seeking support for identifying curriculum, gaining commitment from the school district and community to advance sex ed, and building district capacity to teach sex ed and sustain it.



We want to train teachers to teach sexual health education and **want to get people feeling extremely comfortable in the conversation of sexual health education, and kids feeling like it is part of their education starting in Kindergarten** and won't just be an awkward conversation in their most awkward years but an ongoing conversation that is socially accepted and normal. And then with that all of those great side effects – conscious conception, lower STI rates, and access to health care.

– District Stakeholder

Community engagement looks different in each district and is designed to draw on local strengths and meet community-specific needs. However, among districts that have effectively led community engagement efforts around sex ed, there are common strategies for bringing stakeholders into the conversation that ultimately contribute to not only support, but also to progress toward improving sex ed for young people. The following sections highlight those key steps for success.

What are the key steps to community engagement for sex ed?



Identify a champion. Stakeholders in each district, as well as the WISE Colorado leads at Trailhead, underscore the importance of finding the right person in the community to lead the work. A champion needs to be someone passionate about the goal of supporting young people, a person who has earned community trust, and someone with the time and commitment to manage and see the work through. In some districts, champions are district staff – nurses, curriculum directors, and other roles specific to physical education or sexual health. In other communities, a champion may work in a nonprofit partner organization with deep roots in the school districts. For example, WISE leads support the work of a district Nurse and Wellness Coordinator who works in two rural districts of the state. Her longstanding ties to the community and the school districts make her an effective champion. Her connections with other Wellness Coordinators in the area creates potential for further spread of WISE work in the future. In another district, the leader of an education nonprofit champions the WISE work. She has drawn on her knowledge of the community and relationships with school districts, local foundations, parents/guardians, young people, and other community stakeholders to persistently advocate for sex ed.



Listen to the community and learn about priorities. Several of the districts began their sex ed journey by gathering input from stakeholders in the community to understand what they identify to be the sex ed needs and priorities, what gaps there currently are, what values come into play as it relates to sex ed, and what questions or concerns they have about implementing or enhancing sex ed. The most common stakeholder included in input opportunities were young people, parents/guardians, and teachers. One district gathered information about parent/guardian perceptions about sex ed and what young people need through a community survey and then held meetings with groups of young people to hear what they thought needed to be prioritized. In another district, the sex ed lead implemented a human-centered design process to identify sex ed priorities and opportunities to most effectively implement improved sex ed (*see page 12 for a snapshot about the human-centered design process*). Listening to the community not only grounds sex ed efforts in their self-identified priorities, but it also builds interest and commitment, and makes the case for sex ed. It creates opportunities to proactively address concerns, increase transparency and debunk sex ed myths that might impede progress.



There needs one person on site who really cares about this and then supporting them and giving them skills to be an advocate. Even a nurse or social workers. Identifying who at the school might not have power but as a passion and giving them power has been key.

– District Stakeholder

What are the key steps to community engagement for sex ed? continued



Engage a wide range of stakeholders in the community. Effective community engagement includes people in the community with diverse roles and perspectives. Creating support for sex ed requires finding allies within and outside of the school district. Being inclusive of people and their different perspectives contributes to creating a common understanding of needs and priorities, building support, and proactively addressing concerns. WISE Colorado districts recommend engaging the essential stakeholders of district leadership, school staff and teachers, parents/guardians, and young people. However, they also identify larger group of community stakeholders who have lent support and shared valuable input. These include but are not limited to: local health departments; medical professionals; nonprofits; the media; and the District Attorney's office. While several districts recognize the importance of engaging the faith community, faith leaders were not part of the process in these districts.



Bring in the people who oppose these things and listen to their opinion. **Had we not brought in the community in the decision making, we were not going to hear all of the viewpoints that we needed.** It can be educational to those folks as well. We're not here trying to corrupt everybody. Here's our purpose. Just explain why you're doing it and let those people be heard.

– District Stakeholder

Which stakeholders should be at the table?

Parents and guardians are powerful allies and advocates. One district lead emphasized the power that parents'/guardians' voices have in advocating for sex ed in schools. District leadership often fear parent/guardian pushback about sex ed, but research repeatedly shows that parents/guardians not only support, but are eager for schools to provide comprehensive sex ed. Through community engagement efforts, sex ed champions empower parents/guardians to speak up in the community and with the district to advocate for sex ed.

Young people are powerful advocates for sex ed. Engaging them to speak up and make the case for their interests and needs is important for the larger community – and the school district specifically – to hear. Beyond engaging young people to make the case for sex ed generally, WISE districts have demonstrated the power of authentically engaging young people in the design of sex ed, including components for students, parents/guardians, and teachers.



Center messaging on the common goal of supporting young people. When working with people who span a range of beliefs and values, ground the conversation in the shared value of commitment to the comprehensive wellbeing of young people. Framing sex education as essential for setting up young people to be healthy and productive adults helps people meet on common ground and realize that they are working toward shared goals. In one district, the superintendent has created a culture of open communication with the community and regularly invites conversation. The superintendent's approach conveys the district's commitment to supporting young people holistically, and sex ed is part of the comprehensive education that will help them build essential life skills.

[It is] important to think about how you're serving [the community] in a decision that will serve your youngest citizens. [To say] "Hey, I'm paying attention here and I know that our future and present is changing." We need to make sure that our schools are reflective of that.

– District Stakeholder

What are the key steps to community engagement for sex ed? continued



Secure commitment from school district administration. School district support is essential for bringing sex ed to schools, improving upon what exists, and sustaining it over time. Finding a champion who has decision-making power within the district opens doors to advance curriculum, train teachers, and carve out classroom time for instruction. Leadership support indicates to the rest of school and district staff that the district values sex ed and sees it as an educational priority. In one district, the school nurse who championed sex ed brought along the superintendent through conversation. While the superintendent was hesitant and not initially in support, discussions about the role of sex ed in giving young people tools to be healthy and empowered helped him understand the need and he supported her work to advance sex ed in the district. In some districts, finding the champion may require persistence and multiple tries. For example, the sex ed lead in another district experienced several false starts before finding the right champion in the two districts she works in. She had difficulty getting support from the superintendent in one district, so she approached principals and guidance counselors as another potential inroad. In another district, school board support was essential for improving sex ed and the sex ed lead struggled with getting board attention. However, she finally identified a board member who was a former teacher and was committed to sex ed. His support facilitated the process for the sex ed lead to make progress.



Create an advisory committee. Bring together a group of stakeholders to work together to advance sex ed. Advisory committees are most effective when they have a clear and well-organized process for input, are grounded in group agreements and norms, and have well defined objectives. While advisory group composition varies by district, they should include a diverse set of stakeholders who hold different roles in the community and can speak to different perspectives. Common advisory committee members include district and school staff, parents/guardians, local nonprofit partners who are involved in youth health, and community medical professionals. One district modeled a very effective advisory committee process, which included diverse community stakeholder representation and was structured as a series of four organized and facilitated meetings with clear objectives and ground rules. The process resulted in the group selecting a curriculum that was then approved by the school board (*see page 13 to learn more about this advisory committee process*). Another district created an advisory board that included parents/guardians, teachers, and community members. They were charged with reviewing the lessons in the newly selected curriculum to discuss questions or concerns with them and any suggested modifications. The work with the advisory board ensured that multiple stakeholders were familiar with the curriculum and could stand as champions and resources when the district moved into implementation.



Persistence pays [off]. [It can be] one step forward and then 10 steps back. [when we had setbacks, we were] still like what will we do next and what is the next avenue and how do we make more allies and more avenues in. **If a door is shut there is probably a window open somewhere.**

– District Stakeholder

Establishing a task force or advisory board and getting some of the key players involved and explaining to them what you are doing [is important]. People just assume – they don't know. **When you get in and show them the curriculum you are using and the lessons – you can see a sigh of relief. The fear of the unknown is huge.** Get a board member on your board so they know what you will be doing. Get parents and community members too because people talk and if they know what is going on and someone says something that is incorrect they'll [be able to correct it]. **You get buy in so much faster.**

– District Stakeholder

Tips for Mitigating Fear of Controversy

Engaging the community in the process of bringing new and enhanced sex ed to schools can go a long way toward avoiding pushback. WISE Colorado districts shared that they largely avoided major challenges and were met with community support and interest. They also learned lessons about effective ways to address concerns that stakeholders raise.

Lead with listening and focus on storytelling. The WISE Colorado lead at Trailhead explained that the approach to sharing information, responding to concerns, and addressing misinformation matters. Leading from a place of curiosity and listening is an important step toward creating an open conversation. Rather than focusing heavily on facts or engaging argumentatively, she has found that prioritizing storytelling keeps the conversation going. Sharing stories about how other communities have approached sex ed and their successes helps concerned stakeholders see how other communities that they identify as similar to their own (e.g., shared values, similar demographics) helps them put the work into perspective and envision what a process could look like in their own community.

Find middle ground. Leads in two districts emphasized the importance of compromise and finding middle ground. By hearing all perspectives and finding ways to meet the majority of stakeholders' needs in some ways allows for progress – even if incremental. Even if not all priorities and goals are initially achieved, finding points of agreement and compromise allows for sex ed to take a foothold and it to be built upon over time.

Take concerns in stride. One stakeholder emphasized the importance of not “overblowing controversy.” There will be people who raise concerns and some may express anger, but responding with calm, recognizing that pushback is the exception and not the rule, and being prepared to respond directly and focusing on student needs allows those incidents to be addressed in a timely way without undoing or derailing progress.

View parents/guardians as allies. One district lead encourages other sex ed champions to recognize parents/guardians as allies and to not be afraid that they will oppose sex ed. When concerns arise, it is often because parents/guardians don't have enough information about what students will learn or because of misinformation. Engaging parents/guardians early on to give them an opportunity to provide input, review curricula, and preview the lessons their students will receive demystifies sex ed. District leads also have conversations with parents/guardians to acknowledge and appreciate a full range of beliefs and values and discuss how sex ed can support students regardless of those differences.

How you explain it matters. If someone asks you a question, don't go into argumentative mode or throwing data. **It's more about storytelling.** [We] don't want to necessarily lump communities together, but **people do like hearing stories from similar districts with shared values.** Letting them know what the process looked like has helped them to build that trust.

– Trailhead Staff



The ... way you... handle any conflict is to listen to what the other folks are saying and where they are coming from. I hear your concern and – yelling louder isn't the answer. **I think it's trying to figure out what works to find some middle ground...**

– District Stakeholder

Dealing with the controversy but not overblowing it because the one-off event becomes a norm and it's [whatever the controversy is] recognizing that it's one off – **the vast majority of parents and students want sex ed.**

– District Stakeholder

Role of Community Engagement: Contributions and Successes



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What successes has community engagement in Colorado led to?

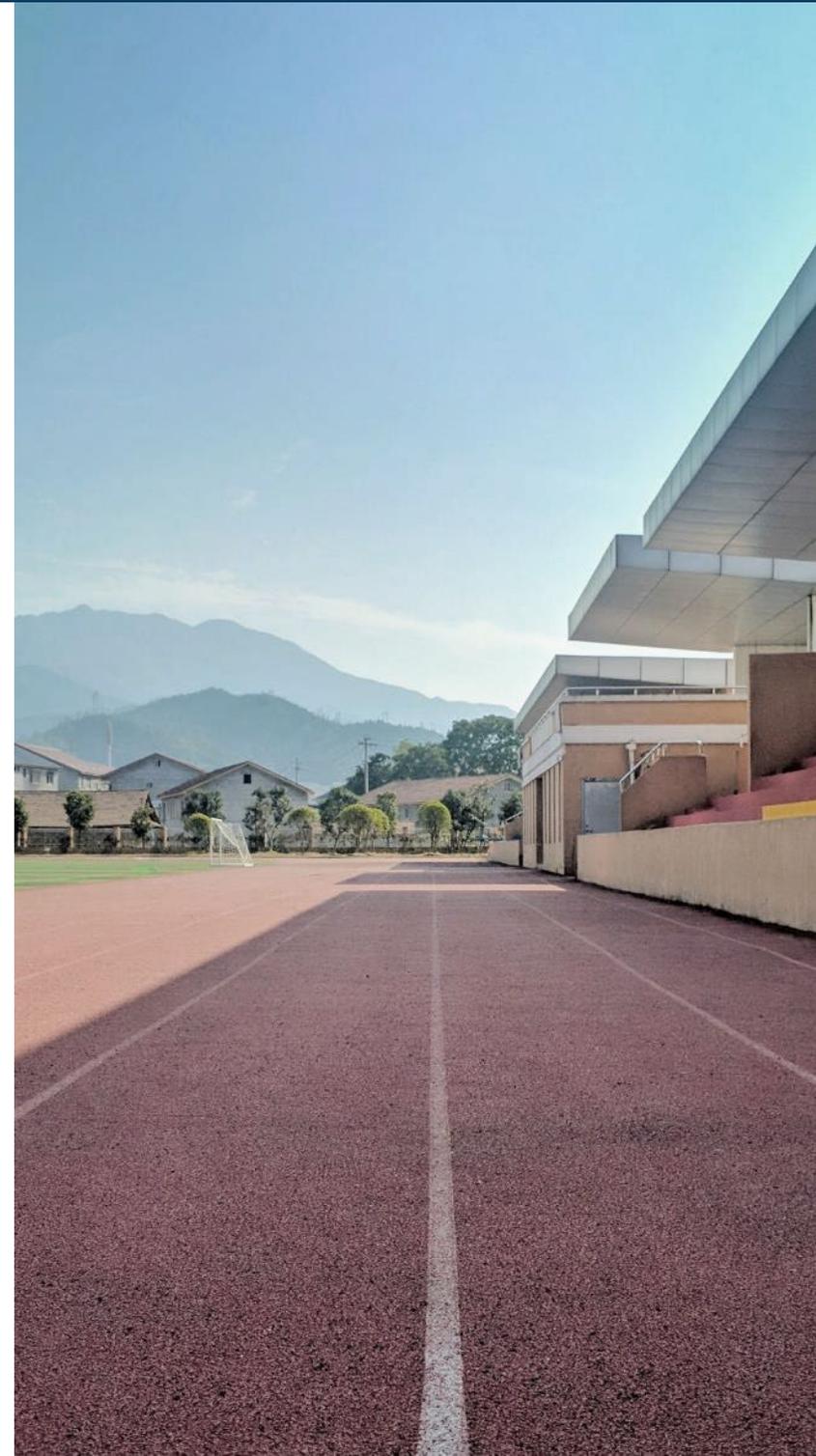
Districts are improving the quality and quantity of sex ed. Community engagement strategies have resulted in young people receiving new or improved sex ed in their classrooms. Districts have adopted and implemented new curricula, trained teachers to increase their comfort and skills teaching sex ed, and some districts have also offered parents/guardians information sessions to help them understand the curriculum and feel prepared to engage their students in conversations at home. Students are receiving better education that covers both physical and social emotional health, which serves to support young people to make healthy decisions and build the skills needed to form healthy relationships.

Young people are excited, engaged, and empowered. Students have shared positive feedback in several of the districts, and in some cases are urging the schools to expand sex ed to more grades. In districts where young people have been authentically engaged in bringing sex ed to their schools – particularly those who contribute as part of advisory groups and in internships – they are empowered by seeing the impact of their voice in making change. For example, in a district where students informed the content of teacher trainings, they saw how the district valued their opinion and prioritized making sex ed meet the needs they identified for themselves.

Parents/guardians share positive feedback and voice support.

Parents/guardians demonstrated to the districts that they wanted their young people to receive sex ed in school. This support continued once sex ed was implemented: parents/guardians have shared positive feedback, and in some cases, encouraged the district to continue to expand it into additional grades.

Building community support. Involving community stakeholders from the beginning helped prevent possible issues driven by fear of controversy later on. Having dialogue about the needs for sex ed, common values, and including people in the process of determining the specifics of instruction created support and also ensured that the plan was one that a diverse group of people developed and could stand behind, rather than being a top down decision. One stakeholder noted that even if not everyone agreed, the transparency and collaborative decision making allowed them to accept it.



SPOTLIGHT ON DENVER:

A Human-Centered Design Approach to Improving Sex Ed

The Sex Education Specialist in Denver Public Schools implemented a human-centered design approach to enhance the sex ed program in Denver Public Schools. Through a year-long engagement process, which included one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and observation with students, teachers, and parents/guardians, she identified the strengths and opportunities for sex ed. Through the input process, young people explained that they were learning about anatomy and STDs, but what they really needed were soft skills: skills that would help them have healthy relationships. The information gathering process also illuminated that “fear was the overriding emotion:” young people were afraid and frustrated that they didn’t have the tools to have healthy relationships; teachers were afraid that parents/guardians would be mad at them; and parents/guardians were afraid that they would be unequipped to answer the questions their young people brought home after participating in sex ed. Understanding people’s emotions and needs gave her the fodder for creating new sex ed resources for teachers, parents/guardians, and students.

These resources created through the human-centered design process include:

Online teacher training

The Sex Education Specialist engaged students as partners in creating solutions. She hired paid youth interns, who worked with her to develop an online training certification program that would be required for all educators teaching sex ed in the district. The youth interns conducted a survey with teachers and students and used the findings to develop seven training videos that will be part of the training content.

Parent workshops

Based on parent/guardian input about the information and skill they want from schools, Denver Public Schools piloted parent/guardian workshops that schools can provide before teaching sex ed. Parents/guardians shared that they want to be familiar with the curriculum so they know what their students are learning, they want foundational knowledge about puberty and healthy relationships, and they want help developing skills to have conversations with their young people at home. In addition to helping parents/guardians feel prepared for their students to participate in sex ed, Denver Public Schools learned that holding parent/guardian workshops increases the opt-in rate among families.

Online class for students

This coming year, a new group of youth interns will help develop an online class for students. Students shared input that it is essential that teachers manage behavior in the classroom so that it is a safe space for students to learn, which means removing students who are disruptive. However, they observe that the students who are asked to leave the classroom because of their behavior may be the ones who need sex ed the most. Online education resources would complement in-classroom education and create opportunities to learn through different channels.

“Human-centered design...was the best way to say we are really listening empathically to what people need and are creating resources based on that and not what we think they need.”

SPOTLIGHT ON CAÑON CITY:

Engaging an Advisory Committee to Select Sex Ed Curricula

When the Curriculum Director in Cañon City Schools joined the district, he saw that the sex ed curriculum was severely outdated and instruction did not meet students' comprehensive wellness needs. With the support of a new Superintendent, Cañon City partnered with WISE Colorado to adopt a new curriculum and update sex ed instruction. As a district that prioritizes social-emotional learning, it was essential that a new curricula be comprehensive and inclusive, focusing on whole student wellness. Sex ed needed to include not only anatomy, puberty, STIs, and pregnancy prevention, but also information about gender inclusivity and healthy relationships. The Curriculum Director formed an Advisory Committee to guide the curriculum review and selection process. He prioritized community engagement and input, recognizing that engaging the community would ensure that different perspectives were considered and ultimately lead to greater commitment to improving sex ed instruction. The process was highly effective.

The curriculum review and selection process resulted in the Board adopting the new curriculum, training teachers, and successfully implemented sex ed in the classrooms. The district has largely experienced support from parents/guardians and community members, and the inclusive process was critical to achieving that outcome.

Two key factors contributed to the success of the Advisory Committee process:

Inclusive Advisory Group composition

The Curriculum Director prioritized engaging a diverse group of people on the Advisory Committee. It was important that the group include people with a wide range of roles in the community, and also that it include people with a different perspectives (not only those expected to be supportive). The committee included representatives from the school district, school board, teachers, school health professionals, medical community, and parents/guardians.

Structured, organized, and facilitated meetings

The Curriculum Director planned and facilitated a series of four in-person Advisory Committee meetings. The first meeting started with identifying and discussing norms, laying the groundwork for how the group would work together and to what end. The group learned about the current sex ed landscape in the district, including sex ed standards, district wellness principles, and current sex ed instruction. They also reviewed district-specific data about risk factors for young people, such as STI and pregnancy rates and age at first intercourse to understand sex ed needs. The Curriculum Director worked with Trailhead Institute to identify curriculum options that could be a good fit for the district. After vetting the options with three local partner organizations, the Advisory Committee completed a comprehensive comparative review, voted, and made a curriculum recommendation to the Board of Education. Advisory group members valued that the process was well organized (including agendas and hard and electronic versions of materials), grounded in group working guidelines and shared objectives, and that the Curriculum Director effectively facilitated the sessions and made people's time feel valuable and well used.

"I am a big believer in co-creation. People will be more involved in the outcome if they are involved in the process."

About the WISE Funder Collaborative

Led by the Grove Foundation, the WISE initiative is supported by a collaboration of funders including the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

About the WISE Initiative

Established in 2008 with grantmaking beginning in 2009, WISE is a national initiative dedicated to institutionalizing sex education – so that sex education is part of schools' ongoing curricula. The goals of the WISE initiative are to 1) advance school-based sex education programs by supporting targeted implementation efforts and 2) expand the field's body of knowledge related to best practices for institutionalizing sex education.

About Trailhead Institute

The Trailhead Institute acts as a strategic resource for the public and environmental health community. Through the WISE Initiative, the institute supports organizations, collaboratives, communities and school districts in increasing access to comprehensive sexual health education for young people using an approach that is collaborative and community-driven. The Trailhead Institute operates and implement programming based on the belief that every young person has the right to receive medically accurate information so they are empowered to make informed decisions about their own sexual health.

About Learning for Action

Established in 2000, Learning for Action is headquartered in San Francisco's Mission District. LFA's mission is to partner with social sector organizations to advance knowledge, capacity, and culture of learning in the service of equity and justice. LFA's technical expertise and community-based experience ensure that the insights and information we deliver to nonprofits, foundations, and public agencies can be put directly into action. We aim to support structural change that addresses the underlying root causes of inequities so that all members of our communities have access to the opportunities they deserve for productive, healthy, and meaningful lives.