

December 12, 2023

Karen Hacker, MD, MPH  
Director  
National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
1600 Clifton Rd.  
Atlanta, GA 30333

Dear Dr. Hacker:

In light of the realignment of the Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH) within the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, the undersigned organizations, committed to advancing sexual health education, strongly urge the CDC to ensure DASH's work remains prioritized on supporting LGBTQIA+ young people, preventing Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), HIV and unplanned pregnancy, and improving mental health outcomes.

Across the United States, young people experience disproportionate rates of STIs, including HIV, and unintended pregnancies, which are exacerbated further by racial and ethnic, geographic, and socioeconomic disparities.<sup>1</sup> DASH has been integral to producing research on the needs of historically marginalized and underserved young people and translating that research into effective programs. We are concerned that this reorganization may lead to existing DASH priorities falling through the gaps.

COVID-19 brought immense instability to the lives of young people. Between 2019 and 2021, fewer sexually active high school students reported receiving STI testing and HIV testing—the decline in STI testing was more severe for LGBTQIA+ youth, and the decline in HIV testing was more severe for Black and Hispanic students than White students. In that same period, contraceptive use among sexually active high school students decreased significantly, with the greatest decline occurring among sexually active students fifteen and younger.<sup>2</sup>

DASH's *What Works in Schools* approach has been proven to showcase improved health outcomes and behaviors of students in schools that implement the three-tiered program that explores improving health education learning, access to health services and care, and safe and supportive environments.

The number of adolescents reporting poor mental health is increasing, and these feelings were found to be more common among LGBTQIA+ students, female students, and students across racial and ethnic groups. Distressingly, in 2021 suicide was the third leading cause of death for fourteen to eighteen year olds.

DASH's work on school connectedness demonstrates that students who feel connected and supported in their schools are less likely to engage in risk behaviors and experience poor mental health.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Szucs LE, Pampati S, Li J, et al. Role of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sexual Behaviors and Receipt of Sexual and Reproductive Health Services Among U.S. High School Students — Youth Risk Behavior Survey, United States, 2019–2021. *MMWR Suppl* 2023;72(Suppl-1):55–65. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su7201a7>

<sup>2</sup> Szucs LE, Pampati S, Li J, et al. Role of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sexual Behaviors and Receipt of Sexual and Reproductive Health Services Among U.S. High School Students — Youth Risk Behavior Survey, United States, 2019–2021. *MMWR Suppl* 2023;72(Suppl-1):55–65. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su7201a7>

<sup>3</sup> Wilkins NJ, Krause KH, Verlenden JV, et al. School Connectedness and Risk Behaviors and Experiences Among High School Students — Youth Risk Behavior Survey, United States, 2021. *MMWR Suppl* 2023;72(Suppl-1):13–21. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su7201a2>

As states are increasingly targeting the LGBTQ+ community with laws that would restrict individuals' rights and students are facing mental health and violence crises, DASH's commitment to LGBTQIA+ young people has been unwavering. Thanks to DASH's research, we know that LGBTQIA+ supportive school policies and practices support all students. Ultimately, it is more important than ever that LGBTQIA+ youth—and by extension, all young people—are provided safe and supportive learning environments. Students need DASH to remain a champion for evidence-based school health programs that include HIV, STI, and pregnancy prevention and support mental health regardless of its position within the CDC.

Thank you for your consideration. Please reach out to Rachel Deitch ([rdeitch@ncsddc.org](mailto:rdeitch@ncsddc.org)) at the National Coalition of STD Directors and Sydelle Barreto ([sbarreto@siecus.org](mailto:sbarreto@siecus.org)) at SIECUS with any questions.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Youth  
AIDS Alabama  
AIDS Alliance for Women, Infants, Children, Youth & Families  
AIDS United  
American Atheists  
American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists  
GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ+ Equality  
Healthy Teen Network  
NASTAD  
National Family Planning & Reproductive Health Association  
National Coalition of STD Directors  
National Working Positive Coalition  
NMAC  
Reproaction  
SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change  
The AIDS Institute

Cc: Kathleen Ethier, PhD