**Standard of Practice Guidelines for**

**Teachers Answering Student Questions Related to**

**HIV and Sex Education**

**Great American School District**

**Sex Education Advisory Board**

**Revised [insert date]**

**Approved by Board of Education [insert date]**

**Teachers play a critical role in ensuring a safe and healthy school climate.**

* **Be sure classroom ground rules are posted and reviewed with students.**
* **Use a matter of fact tone.**
* **Always affirm students for asking questions.**
* **Follow up privately, if necessary.**
1. Teachers will provide a question box to allow students to submit anonymous questions. Every student in the class will be given a slip of paper at the beginning of each lesson and will place their slip of paper in the question box at the end of sex education lessons. On it, each student will write a question, a comment about the class, or a compliment for the teacher. This ensures anonymity and encourages reflection on the day’s lesson.
* In grades 4-6, teachers will make the question box available for every sex education lesson.
* At middle and high school, teachers will use a question box, but may choose to have it available at two points during the sex education lessons, rather than every day.
1. Teachers will answer any question asked by students (whether via the question box or verbally) in a developmentally appropriate and professional manner, except those prohibited by state law (abortion). Supports for teachers to answer questions include the following:
* The fourth and fifth grade *Michigan Model for Health* HIV Education lessons provide “Guidelines for Answering Students’ Questions” that provide guidance for more specific questions related to HIV and AIDS.
* *Puberty: The Wonder Years* for grades 4, 5, and 6 includes an appendix titled “Answering Student Question and Typical Student Questions” that provides sample answers.
* For other sensitive topics, sample answers will be provided by the Sex Education Advisory Board (SEAB) as needed. Read the section below for these.
* These sample answers are to be used for guidance; they are not a script to be followed.
1. Teachers may provide factsheets on topics of interest to the students. Factsheets must be pre-approved by the SEAB and school board as Michigan law dictates.
2. A teacher does not need to know the answer to every question. For example, “I don’t have that answer right now, but let me check it out and get back to you tomorrow,” is an acceptable response. When the response is postponed, be sure to return to the question at a later time.
3. Teachers will provide referrals for questions that they don’t know how to answer or if students request additional information. Referrals may include websites and hotline numbers that have been approved by the SEAB. Referrals may not be made for abortion, in compliance with Michigan law.
4. If a question is asked that cannot be discussed in the classroom, affirm the student for asking. Then, explain that some topics cannot be discussed at school and refer the student to a parent or other trusted adult for the information requested.
5. Teachers will refer students to their parents or other trusted adults for answers to questions under the following circumstances:
* That go beyond the scope of what can be taught in school due to state laws or district guidelines
* That may differ depending on personal, family, and/or religious/spiritual values.

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**Sample Answers to Sensitive Questions**

The SEAB has developed some recommended answers to questions about sensitive topics: abortion, homosexual, and masturbation. Recommendations for answering each topic are provided below. These sample answers are to be used for guidance; they are not a script to be followed.

**Abortion** **–Short Answer**: *Abortion* is a term for the premature ending of a pregnancy. If you have more questions about abortion, please talk to a parent or trusted adult.

**Abortion –Long answer**: *Abortion* is a term for the premature ending of a pregnancy. Some abortions are spontaneous; they are usually called miscarriages. Miscarriage happens when something goes wrong as the embryo or fetus develops and it dies and is expelled from the uterus. Other abortions are caused by medical intervention; these are called clinical abortion. If you have more questions about abortion, please talk to a parent or other trusted adult.

**Tip: Michigan law prohibits teaching about abortion as a method of family planning or reproductive health. For this reason, avoid discussing it beyond this definition. The “long answer” for abortion is recommended by the Sex Education Advisory Committee, but it is okay to use the short answer.**

**Masturbation – Short Answer:** *Masturbation* is when a person touches their own genitals for the purpose of sexual stimulation. If you have more questions about masturbation, please talk to a parent or other trusted adult.

**Masturbation – Long Answer:** *Masturbation* is when a person touches their own genitals for the purpose of sexual stimulation. Some people masturbate, and some don’t; either is normal. Some people think masturbation is wrong, and some don’t. If you have questions about whether it is okay for you, talk to a parent or another trusted adult or your spiritual leader to find out what they believe. If a person touches someone else for sexual stimulation, that is not masturbation.

**Tip: The “long answer” for masturbation is recommended by the Sex Education Advisory Committee, but it is okay to use the short answer.**

**Tips for discussion of the sexual orientation and gender identity topics that follow:**

* **Sexual orientation and gender identity are often confused with each other, but they are different concepts. This topic is about sexual orientation, who we want to be with.**
* **It is important that we treat everyone with respect regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression.**

**Gay – Short Answer (Elementary):** *Gay* means when a man loves a man, or a woman loves a woman.

**Gay – Long Answer (Elementary):** *Gay* means when a man loves a man, or a woman loves a woman. People love each other in different ways. For example, some men love and want to be partners with or marry a man, and some women love and want to be partners with or marry a woman.

**Sexual Orientation – Short Answer (Middle/High School):** *Sexual orientation* is about who you’re attracted to and are drawn to romantically, emotionally, and sexually. Everyone has a sexual orientation. People may be attracted to persons of the same gender or other genders. People generally know their sexual orientation by the time they are 10 to 12 years old.

**Sexual Orientation – Long Answer (Middle/High School):** *Sexual orientation* is about who you’re attracted to and are drawn to romantically, emotionally, and sexually. Everyone has a sexual orientation. People may be attracted to persons of the same gender or other genders. People generally know their sexual orientation by the time they are 10 to 12 years old. Some examples of words people might use to identify their sexual orientation include straight, heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and queer.

**Tips:**

* **It is important to remember that when trying to refer appropriately to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, the way certain words and terms are used is fluid and evolving. Sometimes, word usage depends on context. For example, referring to a lesbian as a “dyke” can be an insult—if used offensively—or it can be a recognition of that person’s identity and their community. If someone feels a word has been used in a derogatory or offensive way, teachers should intervene and address the situation appropriately.**
* **Queer is an umbrella term used to describe individuals who don’t identify as straight. It may also be used to describe a person’s political affiliation or beliefs. Due to its historical use as a derogatory term, it is not embraced or used by all members of the LGBTQ community and is offensive when used as an epithet.**

**Gender Identity – Short Answer (Elementary):** *Gender identity* means whether we are a boy, a girl, or some other gender. We all have a gender identity.

**Gender Identify – Long Answer (Elementary):** *Gender identity* means whether we are a boy, a girl, or some other gender. We all have a gender identity. There are lots of different ways to be a boy or a girl or another gender. It’s not just our bodies, but how we think about ourselves in our minds.

**Gender Identity – Short Answer (Middle/High School):** *Gender identity* is a person’s deeply held internal sense of being a boy/man, a girl/woman, or somewhere else on the gender spectrum. Everyone has a gender identity. People generally know their gender identity by the time they are three to five years old. Common identity labels include man, woman, genderqueer, transgender, gender fluid, non-binary, agender, and more.

**Gender Identity – Long Answer (Middle/High School):** *Gender identity* is person’s deeply held internal sense of being a boy/man, a girl/woman, or somewhere else on the gender spectrum. Everyone has a gender identity. People generally know their gender identity by the time they are three to five years old. Common identity labels include man, woman, genderqueer, transgender, gender fluid, non-binary, agender, and more. Gender identity is different from gender expression, which relates to how a person communicates their gender identity to others through expressions such as their clothing, hairstyle, and mannerisms.

**Transgender – Short Answer (Elementary):** *Gender identity* means whether we are a boy, a girl, or some other gender. We all have a gender identity. For some people, how they feel on the inside doesn’t match how they look on the outside. For example, a person might be born with a penis, but know they are a girl; or a person might be born with a vulva, but know they are a boy. When this happens, they might identify as transgender.

**Transgender – Long Answer (Elementary):** *Gender identity* means whether we are a boy, a girl, or some other gender. We all have a gender identity. For some people, how they feel on the inside doesn’t match how they look on the outside. For example, a person might be born with a penis, but know they are a girl; or a person might be born with a vulva, but know they are a boy. When this happens, they might identify as transgender. There are lots of different ways to be a boy or a girl or another gender. It’s not just our bodies, but how we think about ourselves in our minds. Just because someone looks like a boy or looks like a girl, that doesn’t mean we know how they feel on the inside.

**Transgender – Short Answer (Middle/High School):** *Gender identity* is a person’s deeply held internal sense of being a boy/man, a girl/woman, or somewhere else on the gender spectrum. Everyone has a gender identity.  For some people, how they feel on the inside doesn’t match how they look on the outside. For example, a person might be born with a penis, but know they are a girl/woman; or a person might be born with a vulva, but know they are a boy/man. When this happens, they might identify as transgender.

**Transgender – Long Answer (Middle/High School):** *Gender identity* is person’s deeply held internal sense of being a boy/man, a girl/woman, or somewhere else on the gender spectrum. Everyone has a gender identity. For some people, how they feel on the inside doesn’t match how they look on the outside. For example, a person might be born with a penis, but know they are a girl/woman; or a person might be born with a vulva, but know they are a boy/man. When this happens, they might identify as transgender.  Some transgender people may change their name, pronouns, physical appearance, etc. to bring their body or outward appearance into alignment with their gender identity, while others may not.  People generally know their gender identity by the time they are three to five years old.

**Tip: If students have not been taught the term “vulva,” define it as the area between the legs that includes the vagina, clitoris, and labia.**

Please contact [insert name] at [insert phone number and email] if you need additional information about answering student questions.

Sources:

* Adapted from work done by the Lansing School District SEAB.
* Welcoming Schools Project