

# The Characteristics of Effective Health Education Curricula

## What Is Health Education?

A health education curriculum refers to those teaching strategies and learning experiences that provide students with opportunities to acquire the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for making health-enhancing decisions, achieving health literacy, adopting health-enhancing behaviors, and promoting the health of others.<sup>1</sup> A health education curriculum is the primary means through which schools deliver health education and should include the following:

- A set of intended learning outcomes or objectives that directly relate to students' acquisition of health-related knowledge, attitudes, and skills
- A planned progression of developmentally appropriate lessons or learning experiences that lead to achieving health objectives
- Continuity between lessons or learning experiences that clearly reinforce the adoption and maintenance of specific health-enhancing behaviors
- Content or materials that correspond with the sequence of learning events and help teachers and students meet the learning objectives
- Assessment strategies to determine if students have achieved the desired learning

The curriculum clarifies the health content that is important and what students should be able to do as a result of participating in health education learning experiences.

For more information about health education, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) latest webpage at <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health-education/index.htm>.

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Health Education Curriculum Analysis Tool* (Atlanta, GA: CDC, 2021).



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## What Does Research Say About Effective Health Education?

Health education curricula reflect the growing body of research that shows the importance of curricula that

- Emphasize functional health information (i.e., essential knowledge),
- Shape personal values and beliefs to support healthy behaviors,
- Shape group norms valuing healthy lifestyles, and
- Develop essential skills needed to adopt, practice, and maintain health-enhancing behaviors.<sup>2-15</sup>

Studies also demonstrate that less effective health education curricula often overemphasize teaching scientific facts to increase student knowledge.<sup>2-15</sup> Reviews of effective programs and curricula and input from health education experts have identified *15 Characteristics of an Effective Health Education Curriculum*.<sup>2-15</sup> More information about the 15 characteristics can be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/health-education/index.htm>.



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## How Can Teachers Use the 15 Characteristics of Effective Health Education Curricula in Their Practice?

Some school districts purchase commercially available health education curricula that have been evaluated to show positive impacts on student health outcomes. Often, these evaluated health education curricula support several of the 15 characteristics (e.g., use of theory, culturally inclusive teaching strategies) found to contribute



to the effectiveness on student outcomes. Other school districts use locally developed health education curricula that may rely on individual health teachers to create unit and lesson plans. Regardless of the curriculum type, understanding and applying the 15 characteristics is one of the core principles in selecting, developing, and delivering effective health education programs. Teachers who purposely apply and incorporate the Characteristics into all health education unit or lesson plans, learning activities, and assessments may help increase students' likelihood of adopting and maintaining healthy behaviors.

*The 15 Characteristics of an Effective Health Education Curriculum* focus on different aspects of

health education curriculum development and implementation. To learn practical strategies about how teachers can apply the 15 characteristics in their daily practice, click on each of the characteristics listed below. Examples of how to support each characteristic are provided at K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12 grade level spans.

1. Focuses on clear health goals and related behavioral outcomes.
2. Provides functional health knowledge that is basic, accurate, and directly contributes to health-promoting decisions and behaviors.
3. Focuses on reinforcing protective factors and increasing perceptions of personal risk and harmfulness of engaging in specific unhealthy practices and behaviors
4. Addresses personal values, attitudes, and beliefs
5. Uses strategies designed to engage students
6. Addresses social pressures and influences
7. Builds personal competence, social competence, and self-efficacy by addressing skills
8. Provides opportunities to reinforce skills and positive health behaviors
9. Addresses individual and group norms that support health-enhancing behaviors
10. Provides age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate information, learning strategies, teaching methods, and materials
11. Incorporates learning strategies, teaching methods, and materials that are culturally inclusive
12. Provides opportunities to make positive connections with influential others
13. Includes teacher information and plans for professional development and training that enhance effectiveness of instruction and student learning
14. Provides adequate time for instruction and learning
15. Is research based and theory driven



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