

# STRIVING TOWARD DISABILITY JUSTICE AND INCREASED ACCESS

The Michigan Organization on Adolescent Sexual Health (MOASH) urges community leaders, decision-makers, and legislators to use a disability justice lens in any work seeking to support adolescents. Disability justice, coined in 2005 by Queer Disabled women of color, examines how Disabled peoples' experiences intersect with other oppressive forces, such as white supremacy and racism, classism, sexism, transphobia, and homophobia.<sup>1</sup> Failure to use a disability justice lens furthers ableism (i.e. discrimination against people with disabilities in favor of people without disabilities). Our society routinely infantilizes and erases young people with disabilities – removing them from conversations about their sexual and reproductive health and leaving their needs unaddressed. At MOASH, we hold ourselves accountable to supporting Disabled youth in Michigan, and we actively make our work more accessible so that they can advocate for themselves and their peers. This document provides guidance on how to increase disability justice in your own community, practice, and work environments.

## Intentionally seek out and listen to Disabled youths' experiences.

> In the 2020-2021 school year, students with diagnosed disabilities made up 13.5% of the student population in Michigan.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> White Noise Collective. (2016). Exploring Disability Justice. White Noise Collective.

<sup>2</sup> MI School Data. (2021). Special Education Programs Data Portraits Overview: Disability. MI School Data.

<sup>3</sup> Lipscomb, S., Haimson, J., Liu, A.Y., Burghardt, J., Johnson, D.R., & Thurlow, M.L. (2017). Preparing for life after high school: The characteristics and experiences of youth in special education. Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2012. (NCEE 2017-4016). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.

<sup>4</sup> Crisp-Cooper, M. (2018). Our Sexuality, Our Health: A Disabled Advocate's Guide to Relationships, Romance, Sexuality and Sexual Health. University of California, San Francisco, Office of Developmental Primary Care



Disabled youth speak to their own experiences best and are often eager to share how to make communities, practices, and policies more inclusive. We must seek out and amplify their voices, rather than speaking for them, so that they may advocate for themselves. We encourage you to reflect on your own biases and listen to Disabled people when they talk about their experiences with ableism and disability, as well as their perspectives on any other subject.

## Recognize Disabled youths' sexuality and that anyone, regardless of their ability, can experience romantic and sexual feelings.



Many Disabled students do not receive sex ed due to incorrect assumptions that Disabled people cannot or do not have sex.<sup>3</sup> Disabled people can and do experience sexual and romantic attraction, just like non-Disabled people.<sup>4</sup>

## Support and promote practices and policies that are intentionally inclusive for Disabled youth in Michigan. Below is a list of examples of actions we can take at all interpersonal, community, and organizational levels.



Use inclusive language and actively avoid ableist language<sup>5</sup>

Consider...	Instead of...
Asking Disabled people about their personal language preferences, and acknowledging that some people may have different preferences	Assuming that all people with disabilities prefer identity-first language (e.g. "Disabled youth") or person-first language (e.g. "youth with disabilities")
Using "confusing," "chaotic," or "wild"	Using "crazy" or "psychotic"
Using "irrational" or "ridiculous"	Using "dumb" or "stupid"
Describing peoples' traits with observations (e.g. "They are indecisive; they are meticulous; they are quirky")	Using diagnoses as metaphors (e.g. "They are so bipolar; they are so OCD; they have multiple personalities").
Accepting that some Disabled people reclaim slurs like "crip" for use within their communities, without using the term as a non-Disabled person	Assuming that non-Disabled people can refer to Disabled people using these slurs because the term has been reclaimed by some communities

5 Silverman, A. (2021). Disability Language Style Guide. National Center on Disability and Journalism.

6 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). School Health Profiles 2018: Characteristics of Health Programs Among Secondary Schools. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

7 Shapiro, J. (2018). The Sexual Assault Epidemic No One Talks About. National Public Radio (NPR)

8 Mizock, L. & Harkins, D. (2011). Diagnostic Bias and Conduct Disorder: Improving Culturally Sensitive Diagnosis. Child & Youth Services. 32: 243-253. doi: 10.1080/0145935X.2011.605315.



### **Increase Disabled youths' access to inclusive and comprehensive sex ed**

- Sex ed must be intentionally inclusive for Disabled youth so that they can learn how to best care for themselves, their changing bodies, and their relationships. Most health education teachers receive little to no training on how to teach sex ed in a way that is inclusive and accessible. In 2018, 41.7% of Michigan health ed teachers received professional development on how to teach sex ed to Disabled students.<sup>6</sup>
- When Disabled youth aren't taught sex ed, they are less prepared or able to seek support from trusted adults if they experience any form of violence. This is especially worrisome given that Disabled people are more than three times more likely to be sexually assaulted than non-Disabled people – seven times more likely for those with intellectual disabilities.<sup>7</sup> This may disproportionately harm BIPOC youth who are more likely than their white peers to be diagnosed with conduct disorders due to racial bias, leaving them even less likely to receive necessary information about their health and well-being.<sup>8</sup>
- We urge you to support efforts for [individualized education programs \(IEPs\)](#) to offer comprehensive and inclusive sex ed to Disabled youth.
- We encourage local [sex ed advisory boards \(SEABs\)](#) to review and recommend sex ed curricula that are inclusive for Disabled youth. Interested individuals can also get involved with their local SEABs.



**Increase accessibility within your organization and services. Some examples of accessibility at MOASH include closed captions and ASL interpreters; ADA-compliant website access with Userway; Live meeting transcripts with Otter; accessible event spaces; and remote work and events**

**MOASH remains committed to striving toward disability access in sexual health education and sexual health services as one crucial step toward disability justice. As our capacity and funding increase, we will improve our efforts to support and uplift Disabled youth. We urge you to do the same.**