**Senate Health and Human Services Committee**

**Testimony against SB 1031**

**March 15, 2023**

Chair Kolkhorst and Committee Members,

Healthy Future of Texas is a non-profit, non-partisan organization with a focus on teen pregnancy prevention and adolescent health. Thank you for providing the opportunity to weigh in on this important issue impacting Texas kids.

As the saying goes, you measure what you treasure. Because we treasure the health and safety of our Texas youth, we are deeply concerned that SB 1031 would harm our ability to measure key health indicators.

As a parent of two school-aged boys, I know that we all want to keep our kids healthy and safe. As such, I appreciate the intent of the bill which is to protect kids from inappropriate content. However, we believe this bill has several very concerning consequences.

SB 1031 would make several significant changes that would criminalize legitimate research used in teen pregnancy prevention, child abuse prevention, and other fields:

* It would make it a state jail felony for a school district to study or allow a third party to study or survey a child or teen’s sexual behavior, which would even impact surveys that measure victimization.
* It would make it a state jail felony for a university to conduct research on child or teen sexual behavior, potentially including those that seek to measure and understand the scope of child exploitation in our state.

With the very serious offense of a state jail felony, we’d also see an abrupt halt to a huge range of research on important topics like prevention of teen pregnancy, youth dating violence or sexual abuse, all of which intersect with youth sexual behavior. Alarmingly, it would impact the state’s ability to understand and have effective data to combat child sex trafficking.

For any health intervention, we want to know if what we’re doing is helping or harming. If this bill passes, Texas would lose the ability to evaluate whether or not sexual risk avoidance or sexual risk reduction programs actually work. This is important because sometimes these programs can backfire and produce worse outcomes. To evaluate their effectiveness, researchers look to see if programs create positive behavioral change, like abstaining from sexual activity.

On that note, we are concerned that this bill would jeopardize an annual $7.9 million in federal funding that 16 faith and community organizations across Texas receive through the Title V Sexual Risk Avoidance grant, administered by HHSC. The state is required to conduct entry and exit surveys of students to make sure that our investment actually is leading to positive changes in behavior, like students delaying sexual activity, or having the tools to resist peer pressure. If these surveys constitute a felony, we would be likely to lose this important funding.

Additionally, the bill would eliminate crucial data that comes from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, or YRBS, which is overseen by the CDC and administered by 46 states, including Texas. The data are referenced by state agencies, higher education institutions, non profit organizations, and more to develop programming that meets the needs of our kids.

The bill would prevent researchers from asking a student about sexual orientation, so we wouldn’t know how our LGBTQ youth are doing in terms of mental health. These kids face tragically high levels of depression, anxiety and suicidality, and we need accurate data to help them thrive.

If we lose the YRBS or if we lose our ability to evaluate health education programs, we’ll still know how many teenage girls are getting pregnant in Texas each year. We’ll still know how many kids are contracting HIV. We’ll still know how many babies are being born with congenital syphilis. **The difference is, we won’t know what works to prevent those outcomes, understand how they happened, and how best to keep our kids healthy and safe.**

In light of these concerns, we urge members to not vote SB 1031 out of committee.