



**Testimony of Pat Maloney, Director Teen Choice Program,  
Inwood House**

**Thursday, February 5, 2004  
New York Assembly Standing Committee on Education  
New York Assembly Standing Committee on Health**

Good afternoon. My name is Pat Maloney, and I am the Director of the Teen Choice Program, sponsored by Inwood House. Established in 1830, Inwood House is dedicated to helping young people become healthy, self-reliant adults. Our mission is to “Help Teens Take Charge of Their Lives.” We do this by facilitating the development of the knowledge, skills and self-esteem needed to set life goals, make responsible decisions, and avoid teen pregnancy/disease.

In 1978, teen pregnancy and parenting rates were skyrocketing in New York City. The then-Board of Education approached Inwood House and asked for our help in addressing this phenomenon. We established a community outreach initiative called Teen Choice, which is a *comprehensive* school-based, skills-building program designed to help teens make a healthy transition from adolescence to adulthood. Our staff provide weekly small group counseling sessions, individual counseling, classroom workshops and dialogues, a wide array of after-school enrichment activities, and youth development opportunities for both middle and high school students. We also provide parent education and work very closely with school administrators and faculty, as well as community-based providers in every school neighborhood we serve.

We have witnessed the swirling controversies and ongoing struggles to achieve consensus with regard to the health education our students should receive. Despite paper mandates, we know that students simply are not receiving comprehensive health education. While it is astonishing that we are *still* talking about these issues a quarter of a century later, we are grateful to Assembly Members Steven Sanders and Richard Gottfried for sponsoring this hearing. And we are grateful to Assemblyman Scott Stringer and his staff for issuing their eye-opening report, “Failing Grade: Health Education in New York City Schools.”

**There are 1.1 million reasons for providing quality health education, and they are the 1.1 million children in our schools.** Each year Teen Choice alone serves over 5,000 students in communities with the highest rates of teen pregnancy and HIV/AIDS. We know first-hand that kids are daily engaging in risky behaviors, and we know what they need. It is our experience – and evaluations of our program have shown – that providing young people with *complete* information increases their sense of control over sexual decisions and often motivates them to actually *delay* having sex at all. Teen Choice provides kids with a **safe, confidential** space in their schools where they can get accurate information, guidance from a caring adult, and critical thinking skills to help them integrate new knowledge and clarify their values.

Let's face it: Our society both glamorizes and censures sex, and young people face tremendous peer pressure to be sexually active while lacking the facts. It is clear to us that the students we serve are hungry for correct information. Over 1,000 kids voluntarily choose to sign up for our small group sessions every year; 1,200 seek individual counseling; and 600 show up on their lunch break for "drop-in" sessions. And there are always waiting lists and students who beg to join the weekly groups over again.

Kids assume that "everybody's doing it" when, in fact, that is not the case. Those who *are* active, however, are operating under ignorance and myth. More and more **middle** school students are engaging in anal and oral sex, believing that it is safe to do so and that such acts are not really "sex."

These are a few examples of what we hear in Teen Choice: "You can't get pregnant the first time you have intercourse." One young lady feared she might be pregnant because she swallowed sperm, and she had no idea that oral sex put her at danger of contracting a disease. When playing "Sexual Jeopardy" -- a game we use to debunk myths and give kids correct information -- one question that always stumps them has to do with the fact that 50% of all new HIV infections are among people under age 25. They just cannot believe it.

We are familiar with the facts: The Centers for Disease Control states that two Americans between the ages of 13 and 24 are infected with HIV **every hour**. Syphilis diagnoses increased 50% between 2001 and 2002, each case meaning we might see yet another transmission of HIV. Chlamydia rates have climbed among teenagers, and HPV diagnoses are spiraling. As I stand here, countless teens are having unprotected sex that can put them at risk of pregnancy and transmittable infections.

**What are we waiting for?** Every day that passes without adequate health education in our schools puts our children in harm's way. Reproductive health -- representing a natural and universal aspect of every single individual's life development -- must be *integrated* into Health Education, not isolated as a clandestine, taboo topic. When cigarette smoking was elevated to a public health issue, it was coined as "a matter of life and breath." We all know that HIV/AIDS is a matter of life and **death**. No one --not government, not schools, not a noisy vocal minority -- has the right to put our youth at risk of disease or dying. It is imperative that young people be given the skills, knowledge and tools they need to make informed, healthy choices. They cannot make life-altering decisions in a vacuum or without medically accurate, comprehensive information.

As a member of the New York AIDS Coalition's Task Force, Inwood House wholeheartedly endorses the recommendations put forth in their recent report, "A Call for Reform: HIV/AIDS Education in New York City's Public Schools." This thoughtful document describes a series of strategies which, if implemented, would finally result in an **effective** school-based health education program. This report should be distributed to every elected and appointed official in New York, and seriously studied for its behavioral research and promising solutions. It is a blueprint for action **now**.

It is time to apply what we know and tap in to the expertise that already exists. It is time to update our Family Living/Sex Education and HIV/AIDS curricula and conduct wide-scale training of teachers in our schools. It is time to identify adequate resources to coordinate these efforts and creatively access public and private dollars that – in the long run – will save both lives and money.

This is not about “cost”; it is about an investment in our youth.

Poll after poll, including an extensive survey conducted by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, show that an overwhelming majority - **84%** of parents - *welcome comprehensive* sexuality education and *want* their children to know how birth control works and where it can be obtained. Only **one-half of one percent** of public school parents in our city currently opt their children out of the condom availability program (where it exists). This makes perfect sense.

In the coming months we must revise the current school mandate to **allow** teachers to demonstrate correct condom use in classrooms again. We must permit youth-devoted staff from community-based organizations to be trained in far greater numbers so that they can support school staff in disseminating this critical information. In fact, highly skilled and trained staff from community-based organizations can help *provide* needed training to others. We must also continue to develop and replicate effective Peer Education Programs that address HIV/AIDS and the prevention of risky behaviors. And we must start **earlier**. Age-appropriate health education must begin and continue through **every** school grade.

Viruses do not ask questions. Children do. Let’s help them to be health-literate. Let’s work together to ensure their futures. Let’s help them stay alive.

Thank you.