



New York AIDS Coalition

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**Testimony on the State of HIV/AIDS Education in New York City's Public School System
Delivered by Christina Kazanas, Director of Policy & Programs, New York AIDS Coalition
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My name is Christina Kazanas and I am the Director of Policy and Programs for the New York AIDS Coalition (NYAC). NYAC represents over 180 community based providers of services to people living with HIV/AIDS across New York State and strives to build a unified advocacy response in support of fair funding and policies related to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. I would like to thank Assemblymember Sanders and Assemblymember Gottfried for the opportunity to testify today and Assemblymember Stringer for working to bring this hearing together.

I am here today to speak about the issue of HIV/AIDS education in public schools. Our organization is founder and chair of the Task Force on HIV/AIDS Education in New York City Public Schools (otherwise known as the 'Public School Task Force'), which seeks to ensure that our city's youth are educated about the risks of HIV and know how to protect themselves from infection. Task Force members include Assemblymember Stringer's office, Love Heals, New York Civil Liberties Union, Planned Parenthood of New York City, Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, YouthBASE, Youth Organizers United, Inwood House, Bailey House, Gay Men's Health Crisis, and the Hispanic Federation.

Since 1987, the New York State Education Commissioner's regulations have required that public schools throughout the state provide HIV/AIDS education to students in grades K-12, appropriate teacher training, curricula materials and evaluations of the program. The New York City Board of Education expanded this mandate to require six annual HIV/AIDS lessons in grades 7-12 and five lessons in grades K-6. In high schools, health resource sites, an HIV/AIDS Education Team, and an AIDS information training session for parents are required. Despite these clearly delineated requirements, the HIV/AIDS program that exists in today's schools has taken on a very different hue from initial conceptions. Examining the stipulations of the mandate one by one reveals that the school system is not in full compliance.

These grave inadequacies exist in the face of increasing HIV infections among youth. Adolescents and young adults constitute one of the fastest growing populations with AIDS.ⁱ It has been estimated that at least 50% of all new HIV infections nationwide are among young people under age 25ⁱⁱ and it is estimated that two Americans between ages 13 and 24 are infected with HIV every hour. The fact that HIV/AIDS education has crumbled while HIV infections are rising among youth is tantamount to benign neglect.

New York City's school system is a natural and logical venue for reaching youth, providing a golden opportunity to reach 1.1 million children in this city. The alternative is to consign a new generation to HIV. It is imperative that New York City takes steps to prevent infections among its youth by improving age-appropriate HIV/AIDS education at all levels, K-12. To this end, the Department of Education should:

- Update HIV/AIDS curricula;
- Utilize appropriate, well-trained personnel to teach HIV/AIDS lessons;
- Improve evaluation and oversight procedures to ensure that all public schools are fully compliant with HIV/AIDS mandates and that prevention efforts are effective;
- Ensure adequate resources to carry out HIV/AIDS education.

Moreover, it is essential that HIV/AIDS education be taught within the broader context of comprehensive sex education and overall health education. HIV/AIDS is part of a continuum of health issues that affect youth, such as STDs, poor nutrition, rising rates of obesity and substance abuse. Comprehensive sex education and health education are both fundamental in and of themselves, and because they provide an integral framework for HIV/AIDS education.

The New York AIDS Coalition recently released a policy paper entitled, [A Call for Reform: Strengthening HIV/AIDS Education in New York City's Public Schools](#). I am submitting this paper for your review. The paper details the state of HIV/AIDS education in New York City's public schools and extensively discusses the aforementioned recommendations for reform.

The New York AIDS Coalition also recently sponsored a forum on HIV/AIDS Education in New York City's public schools in conjunction with the Public School Task Force. Panelists addressed a range of issues related to the implementation, evaluation and funding of the AIDS mandates. While there was universal agreement that the failure of the school system to comply with State and City mandates was a problem requiring immediate addressing, there was little in the way of commitment from government officials represented on the panel on an action plan.

Immediate action must be taken in order to protect youth in our city. Condoms by themselves will not protect our youth from this epidemic. On-going education about the disease from an early age is an essential component to effective HIV prevention. The longer the city goes without a plan to improve required HIV education activities, the longer our youth go unprotected from this disease. Time is running out for them – we must act now.

In conclusion, NYAC and the Public School Task Force believe that for meaningful progress to be achieved on this issue, there must be continued open dialogue between the community and the government. NYAC and the Public School Task Force enjoy a positive and fruitful relationship with you and your staff, and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Moving forward, we are excited to establish a similar fruitful relationship with the Department of Education as well.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to testify. I hope that this hearing will bring us one step closer to where we need to be in the provision of HIV/AIDS education in our city's public school system.

For more information, contact Christina Kazanas at (212) 629-3075, EXT 108.

13. ENDNOTES

ⁱWalter, HJ and Vaughan, RD. "AIDS Risk reduction Among A Multiethnic Sample of Urban High School Students." JAMA, 11 August 1993; 270 (6): 725-730.

ⁱⁱCDC National Center for HIV, STD, and TB Prevention, Division of HIV/AIDS Prevention. "Young People at Risk: HIV/AIDS Among America's Youth." Fact Sheet. 11 March 2002. www.cdc.gov/HIV/pubs/facts/youth.htm.