



**Testimony of Adrienne Verrilli, Director of Communications,
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New York Assembly Standing Committee on Education
New York Assembly Standing Committee on Health**

Good afternoon. My name is Adrienne Verrilli and I am the Director of Communications at SIECUS, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the adequacy of health education and the HIV/AIDS curricula requirements in New York City schools.

SIECUS is a national organization that works to promote and expand comprehensive sexuality education, STD and HIV/AIDS prevention, teen pregnancy prevention, and sexual abuse prevention in states, communities, and around the world. SIECUS has done a fair amount of work in New York City and New York State.

For 40 years, SIECUS has advocated for age-appropriate, comprehensive sex education. We believe it is the best way to protect our young people from the spread of HIV/AIDS and other STDs, and unintended pregnancy. SIECUS believes that all young people, regardless of whether or not they are sexually active, deserve open, honest, and medically accurate information regarding their sexual health in order to make responsible and informed decisions about their health and their futures.

In 1987, the New York State Education Commissioner took an important step and required that the public schools throughout the state provide HIV/AIDS education to students in grades K-12. In 1991, the New York City Board of Education expanded that mandate to require that schools teach six HIV/AIDS lessons in grades 7-12 among other actions. As a national organization that advocates for adolescent health, SIECUS would like to commend the city and the state for taking these important efforts.

Fulfilling the HIV/AIDS education mandate in the New York City public schools is critical. Despite advances in medical treatment for people infected with HIV, HIV/AIDS is not a disease that has passed. HIV/AIDS is not a disease that discriminates. HIV/AIDS is a disease that is ever present and is taking its toll on an increasingly vulnerable population – young people in communities of color. Every hour, two young people under the age of 25 become infected with the HIV virus. More than half of the new infections of HIV are among young people ages 15-24.

As we have already heard today, the young people in New York City are particularly at risk.

We can help our City's young people by enforcing the HIV / AIDS education mandate in the public schools and ensuring the implementation of comprehensive sexual health education programs that have been proven to be effective.

Numerous comprehensive education programs about sexuality that include messages about both abstinence and contraception have been found to delay sexual activity, reduce the number of sexual partners, and increase contraceptive and condom use among young people.□They also provide critical communication skills and decision-making skills that help young people negotiate relationships and improve their emotional and physical health and well-being.

Furthermore, the major medical organizations, including the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Society for Adolescent Medicine, and the American Nurses Association, believe that sexuality education programs that include information about abstinence and contraception are the best ways to fight HIV / AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Unfortunately, there is no direct funding to the New York City schools for HIV / AIDS education and only a small amount of funding is provided through the New York State Department of Health for the administration of this program. It is our understanding that the New York State Department of Education has no means to enforce this mandate and the state collects no data on compliance. And we continue to be told that resources for HIV / AIDS education are scarce.

I would like to address resources for a moment. New York State received more than \$7 million in federal funds for unproven abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in Fiscal Year 2003 alone. Specifically, New York received \$3.4 million in federal funds in the form of a block grant that it matched with \$2.6 million in state funds. Furthermore, community-based organizations in New York State received more than \$3.7 million in direct grants from the federal government for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs.

New York State has funded these programs despite the lack of scientific evidence of the programs' effectiveness. In fact, recent studies have shown that these programs may be putting our young people at considerable risk. A study conducted by Columbia University's Peter S. Bearman and Hannah Bruckner, *Promising the Future: Virginity Pledges and First Intercourse*, found that young people who publicly signed "virginity pledges" to remain abstinent until marriage delayed intercourse on average of 18 months. However, when they did become sexually active, they were one-third less likely to use contraceptives than their peers that did not pledge.¹

Furthermore, many of the popular abstinence-only-until-marriage programs teach that condoms are ineffective and other medical misinformation about STDs, including HIV / AIDS. Denying our young people accurate information about sexual health will not prevent the spread of HIV / AIDS. It will, however, prevent them from making responsible and informed decisions about their health and their futures.

¹ P. Bearman and H. Brückner, "Promising the Future: Virginity Pledges as They Affect Transition to First Intercourse," *American Journal of Sociology*, 2001.

We should be doing better by our children and require funding for programs that work. By New York State accepting these federal funds, it is turning a blind eye to the health needs of our young people.

In closing, it is not only important to enforce the HIV/AIDS education mandate as expeditiously as possible for the health and lives of our City's kids, but also to ensure that the programs they do receive are comprehensive, age-appropriate, medically-accurate, proven effective, and taught by trained teachers with up-to-date materials. Our kids deserve nothing less.

Thank you again for allowing me to speak on these important issues. I would be happy to answer any questions at the appropriate time.