



PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF NEW YORK CITY

**Testimony presented before the New York State Assembly
Committee on Education & Committee on Health**

**Public Hearing on Health Education in New York City Public Schools
February 5, 2004**

Good morning, my name is Dana Czuczka. I am the Associate Director of Policy at Planned Parenthood of New York City (PPNYC). I am presenting this testimony today on behalf of Joan Malin, the President and CEO of PPNYC. I want to thank the Chairs of the New York State Assembly Committees on Education and Health for holding this public hearing on health education -- an issue that is critically important to the well-being of the young people in New York. I also want to thank the Assemblymembers who are showing their commitment to this issue by being here today. And finally, I want to commend Assemblymember Stringer for his report, "Failing Grade: Health Education in New York City Schools."

Planned Parenthood is here this morning to offer testimony, including six policy recommendations, from our unique perspective as a provider of education, information, and health services to the New York City community for over 80 years.

To many people, PPNYC is best known for our top-rate reproductive healthcare services that we provide at our three health centers (we have one in the Bronx, one in Brooklyn, and one in Manhattan). Each year we provide reproductive healthcare services to nearly 40,000 women, men, and teens.

But Planned Parenthood of New York City is much more than that. Planned Parenthood offers a wide range of programs and initiatives designed to bring reproductive and sexual health information directly to young people and the adults who work with them. Each year we reach

over 3,600 young people through our workshops in public schools, after-school programs, and community organizations. In 2003, PPNYC worked with approximately 30 community organizations and 35 New York City public schools. And through our innovative Training Institute, PPNYC prepares professionals working with young people to serve as educational resources in their communities. We train hundreds of teachers and other youth-serving professionals to provide factual information and effective guidance on a whole range of issues. These adults in turn reach thousands of adolescents citywide every year.

We are here today to discuss the adequacy of health education being received by the students in the New York City public school system. Regrettably, too many of our young people fail to receive the education required by the State and the City -- the very information they need in order to live healthy lives.

A Public Health Crisis in the United States

Since 1991, U.S. teenage pregnancy, abortion, and birth rates have declined steadily in every age and racial/ethnic group.^{1,2,3} Experts attribute the declining rates to a significant increase in contraceptive use by sexually active teens and to a decrease in sexual activity among adolescents.⁴ While this is good news, unfortunately it's not time to cheer yet. Despite these positive trends in teen reproductive and sexual health, the current statistics are still quite alarming. Consider that:

- The U.S. has the highest rates of teen pregnancy and births in the western industrialized world.⁵
- Each year, almost 1 million teenage women become pregnant in the U.S.⁶
- Teenage pregnancy costs the U.S. at least \$7 billion annually.⁷
- Every year, 3 million teens – about 1 in 4 sexually active teens – acquire an STD.⁸
- Approximately half of all new HIV infections occur in people under age 25.⁹

Given this health crisis, it is critical that young people have access to accurate information and services in order to help them make responsible decisions about their bodies and their relationships. In the words of former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher, “Based on the scientific evidence, we face a serious public health challenge regarding the sexual health of our nation. Doing nothing is unacceptable. More than anyone, it is our children who will suffer the consequences of our failure to meet these responsibilities.”¹⁰

In New York City and New York State, the Public Health Challenge is Even More Serious

Sadly, in New York State the public health challenge is even more pronounced and the need for solutions is even more urgent. **Rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in New York State are among the highest in the country.**

On the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy’s website (www.teenpregnancy.org), you can access a list of the fifty states and their rank when it comes to rate of teen pregnancy -- New York places number 43. In other words, New York has the 7th highest teen pregnancy rate in the U.S.¹¹

Let’s shift to the City for a moment: New York City’s teen pregnancy rate is more than double the New York State rate; it is nearly 30% higher than the U.S. rate.

Unfortunately, specific communities within New York City are at higher risk than others.

For example:

- **In 2000, there were five communities that made up 31% -- almost 1/3 -- of all teen pregnancies in NYC:** Bedford Stuyvesant-Crown Heights, Greenpoint-Williamsburg-Bushwick, Crotona-Tremont, High Bridge-Morrisania, and Fordham-Bronx Park.¹²
- **Rates of teen pregnancy in NYC are disproportionately high among young women of color.** The teen pregnancy rate for black non-Hispanic teens was 149.3 and for Hispanic teens it was 130.6 per 1,000 females age 15-19 compared to 33.9 for Asian/pacific Islander teens and 29.0 for white non-Hispanic teens.

Not surprisingly, when it comes to rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), the data are very similar to the teen pregnancy data. Rather than spend too much time this morning citing statistics, I will mention one troubling example. In New York State, the highest rates of gonorrhea are among females 15-24 years old – I'm sorry to report that this is a decade-old pattern.¹³

The data are clear: the health of young people in New York is at risk

To grow into healthy adults, young people need skills and information to help them delay sexual activity and to protect themselves when they do become sexually active. Without this knowledge, young people are at greater risk for unintended pregnancy and STIs. Let me give you some concrete examples of what I mean.

As part of our PPNYC sex education programs we have our students submit anonymous questions so they feel safe to ask whatever they'd like without fear of embarrassment or retribution. Early in my tenure at Planned Parenthood, I was a sexuality educator in our School Initiatives program.

I'd like to share some of the questions I received from the middle school students in my classes:

- How does Nutty Buddy [a brand of soda] work to make sure you don't get pregnant?
- Can you get pregnant if you never had your period before?
- Is it possible to have an STD [sexually transmitted disease] without having sex?
- If a boy asked you on a date and then he takes you home and he wants to have sex with you and there is no one home who do you call or what do you do?

These questions are in no way unique to my classes in the South Bronx and the Lower East Side. I am sure each health educator here can share similar – if not exact – experiences. I am thankful that my students had a venue to ask these questions and receive accurate answers. But imagine all the young people in New York who are currently left in the dark. The bottom line is that

information that is wrong, too little, or too late puts young people at risk. **Young people need to be able to get the facts.**

Despite City and State mandates, many students are not getting the information they need

Twenty-two states and the District of Columbia mandate that public schools teach sex education. New York State is *not* included in this list. New York State *is* however, one of the 38 states (plus D.C.) that require the provision of STD/HIV education.¹⁴ 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 Kindergarten – through 12.¹⁵

In New York City, the health education policy mandates instruction of the “Family Living, Including Sex Education” FL/SE curriculum. In fact, PPNYC was part of the Advisory Committee in the mid-80s that worked on writing the “Family Life, including Sex Education (FL/SE)” curriculum and training teachers on how to facilitate these lessons.

Unfortunately for our young people, the policies do not equal practice in the NYC classrooms. As you have heard this morning, recent reports released by Assemblymember Scott Stringer and the community organization Youth Organizers United reveal that the majority of NYC students are *not* receiving the required lessons.^{16,17} And not only are students not receiving the required lessons, many students are not receiving any information at all.

New York Is Investing State Dollars In Unproven and Potentially Harmful Programs.

Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are required to teach that sexual activity outside of marriage is wrong and harmful and prohibits advocating contraceptive use or discussing contraceptive methods *except to emphasize their failure rates*. Despite years of evaluation, there is currently no evidence that abstinence-only programs delay teenage sexual

activity. Further, recent research shows that abstinence-only strategies may discourage contraceptive use among sexually active teens, increasing their risk of unintended pregnancy and STIs.¹⁸ **Yet, New York State dedicates millions in state dollars to fund abstinence-only programs that are unproven and potentially harmful.** New York currently receives \$3.4 million in abstinence-only funds from the federal entitlement program established through Section 510(b) of Title V of the Social Security Act. Because the federal Title V abstinence-only-until-marriage program requires states to provide three dollars of state funds or services for every four dollars of federal money, New York State matches \$2.6 million worth of state funds for abstinence-only grants.¹⁹

At the same time, New York State has *no* dedicated funding stream for comprehensive sex education programs. New York State currently only funds a small number of pregnancy prevention programs that do provide information about pregnancy and disease prevention beyond abstinence. However, this under-funded, piecemeal approach to health education leaves most New York youth without vital, lifesaving information and skills.

Comprehensive sex education programs are effective at helping young people make healthy decisions about sex.

Planned Parenthood believes all young people should have medically accurate, age-appropriate sex education in schools that includes information on HIV prevention, contraception, abstinence and lessons on communication, relationships, decision-making, etc.

Planned Parenthood believes in sex education because there is considerable scientific evidence that it is effective – sex ed has a proven record. Research shows comprehensive sex education – programs that are age-appropriate, medically accurate and teach about abstinence and contraception – helps young people postpone intercourse, reduce the

frequency of sexual intercourse, reduce the number of sexual partners, and increase the use of condoms and other forms of contraception.²⁰

New Yorkers support a comprehensive approach to sex education.

Planned Parenthood believes in sex education, because parents and caregivers have told us they want sex ed in schools. In New York State, the overwhelming majority of likely voters (77%) agree that age-appropriate, medically accurate sex education should be taught in public schools. This popular support for sex education extends across New York geographically and crosses political affiliation – 83% of suburban voters, 76% of upstate voters, and 74% of New York City voters favor sex education in public schools; 80% of Democrats, 68% of Republicans, and 74% of Independents support such programs.²¹ New Yorkers do not stand alone on this issue. Data from several national public opinion polls show that Americans overwhelmingly favor broad sex education programs in schools.^{22,23} In fact, just two weeks ago a poll released by NPR, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government found that most Americans want a broad sex education curriculum taught – from the basics of how babies are made to contraception to how to get tested for sexually transmitted diseases.²⁴

Recommended Solutions

As an organization deeply invested in these issues we have outlined six recommendations that we’d like to share:

1. **Paradigm Shift:** There needs to be a new paradigm for how sex education is perceived. We must move beyond the fear of community uproar. Parents and caregivers are united and stand strong behind this issue. Parents and caregivers support sex education in the schools –

in fact, they expect sex education in schools. We need to see sex education as a priority school subject that has its rightful place in a young person's schedule just like math and reading. The cost – financial, social, and ethical – is too great not to.

2. **Financial Resources:** It goes without saying that any initiative needs funding for proper implementation and maintenance. While fiscal crisis looms large, investing in prevention programs is key to improving public health outcomes and to building a healthy population. The financial cost of supporting sex education is minimal when considered in relation to the money associated with the cost of unintended teen pregnancy and treatment of sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS.
3. **Time:** This program needs dedicated funds, but it also needs dedicated time. We need to commit the time in a school day and the school year to deliver a substantial program. In addition, we need to commit the time to train teachers – this can not be a one-shot deal. Training or professional development needs to be ongoing, much like it is for all the other school subjects. We need to focus on teachers that are currently in the system, but we also need to take a look at future teachers: we should be working with CUNY and SUNY to figure out how to enhance the course curriculum for a spectrum of teachers.
4. **Update Curriculum Based on Scientific Research of Programs that Work²⁵:** There has been considerable research conducted to determine the elements of effective reproductive and sexual health programs. Some of the “program-musts” include: base the program on theoretical approaches; incorporate behavioral goals, teaching methods, and materials appropriate to the developmental stage, sexual experience, and culture of the target audience; use teachers who believe in the program and are provided with training; give a clear message

about sexual activity and condom/contraceptive use and continually reinforce that message (a comprehensive list is attached to my written testimony).

5. **Evaluation Component:** We believe in sex education because we know it works. That's why we can call for a paradigm switch, resources, and commitment from the Assembly. But it's good public health practice to include an evaluation component to these programs, so we can measure our effectiveness and so we continually improve the program.

6. **Support ASE, Age Appropriate Sex Education Grant Program:** The Planned Parenthood Affiliates of New York State recently launched a new campaign – Get the Facts NY -- to support medically accurate, age-appropriate sex education in New York State. Get the Facts NY represents a broad constituency of education professionals, health care providers, religious leaders, child and health advocates and policy organizations, many who stand here with us today. Currently, the Get the Facts NY campaign is focused on the passage of the Age-Appropriate Sex Education Grant Program (ASE), new legislation introduced by Assembly Health Committee Chair Richard Gottfried that will establish funding for school districts and community based organizations to provide medically accurate, age-appropriate sex education programs. Many Assemblymembers here today have already joined Assemblymember Gottfried in sponsorship, including Education Chair Steve Sanders – we thank you. We invite you all to join them in their support of this important new legislation that will help take us closer to our goal of providing real sex ed to all New York youth.

Conclusion

I want to close by thanking Chairperson Gottfried and Chairperson Sanders for the high priority they have given to this critical public health issue. Planned Parenthood of New York

City is committed to ensuring that all young people have access to medically accurate sex education and we hope that you will call on us if we can be of any assistance to the Health and Education Committees. Thank you again for this opportunity.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹⁷ Youth Organizer United, Are New York City's Public Schools Teaching About HIV/AIDS? Reports by Students, February 2003.
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