

MEMORANDUM IN SUPPORT

A.2856 / S.1342

The Healthy Teens Act

AN ACT to amend the public health law, in relation to establishing the age-appropriate sex education grant program, to be referred to as the Healthy Teens Act.

PROPOSAL: The Healthy Teens Act would establish a competitive grant program through the New York State Department of Health for the specific purpose of awarding grants to support comprehensive, age-appropriate and medically-accurate sex education programs.

BACKGROUND:

Nearly half of New York high school students have had sex and many of them do not have the information to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies.

More than 4 in 10 young people in New York State have had sex before they graduate from high school.¹ Health data for young people suggest that they do not have the tools to protect themselves from contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies when they become sexually active. 15-19-year olds experience significantly higher rates of Chlamydia and Gonorrhea than any of the other five-year age groups in New York,² a pattern that has continued over a decade.³ Similarly, the pregnancy rate remains high among teens in this age group—nearly 40,000 15-19-year olds became pregnant in New York in 2004.⁴

The data are clear: the health of young New Yorkers 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 become sexually active.

Comprehensive sex education programs help young people make healthy decisions about sex.

Comprehensive sex education—programs that are age-appropriate and medically accurate and that teach abstinence, but also provide information about contraception and disease prevention—give teenagers the skills and information they need to make healthy choices. Significantly, the research shows that such programs actually help young people delay intercourse, reduce their number of sexual partners, reduce the frequency of intercourse among young people, and increase their use of condoms and other forms of contraception when they do become sexually active.⁵

On the other hand, abstinence-only-until-marriage programs must teach that sexual activity outside of marriage is wrong and harmful, and they prohibit advocating or discussing contraceptive use or methods—*except to emphasize their failure rates*.⁶ Furthermore, a number of studies have indicated not only that most abstinence-only programs fail to delay or reduce teen sexual activity, but that they also may discourage contraceptive use among sexually active teenagers and do not decrease the incidence of pregnancy and STIs.⁷

New York State spent over \$13.2 million on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs last year, but there remains no dedicated funding for comprehensive sex education programs.

New York State spent \$13,248,287—including \$2.6 million of State money—to fund unproven and potentially harmful abstinence-only programs in Fiscal Year 2005,⁸ and continues to receive one of the highest amounts of federal abstinence-only money in the country. A 2004 Congressional report on the content of federally funded abstinence-only curricula found that 80% of these curricula, which were used by more than two-thirds of 2003 grantees, contain false, misleading or distorted information about reproductive health. Furthermore, a 2006 report released by the non-partisan General Accounting Office concluded that millions of dollars have been

spent to support these programs with little oversight and few mechanisms in place to measure their effectiveness.⁹

Although New York State funds a small number of pregnancy prevention programs, this is the only dedicated state money that supports any type of sex education that teaches about contraception in addition to abstinence. The State does not even provide funding for the implementation of state-mandated HIV/AIDS education.¹⁰ This under-funded, piecemeal approach to health education leaves most New York youth without vital, lifesaving information and skills.

The Healthy Teens Act would enable schools and community-based organizations to implement effective sex education programs and is supported overwhelmingly by the public.

The proposed legislation, introduced with bipartisan sponsorship, would establish a competitive grant program to fund comprehensive sex education. Eligible entities would include school districts, boards of cooperative educational services (BOCES), school-based health centers and community-based organizations. In order to be eligible for a grant, a proposed program must be age-appropriate and medically accurate, and may not teach or promote religion. The bill would not mandate a specific curriculum, but rather recognizes that the community is best positioned to determine what is most appropriate. However, proposed programs are encouraged to include, and may not be inconsistent with, a number of potential components that have been shown to help reduce teen pregnancy and STIs including: stressing abstinence and teaching that it is the only sure way to avoid pregnancy and STIs; providing information about different contraceptive and barrier methods to prevent pregnancy and STIs; encouraging parent involvement and family communication; and teaching relationship negotiation skills and how drugs and alcohol affect responsible decision making. The grant awards would preference areas with higher teen pregnancy and STI rates, and the bill would provide funds for and require the evaluation of the statewide program following years two and five.

New Yorkers overwhelmingly support a State-funded, comprehensive approach to sex education for our young people. 72 percent of New York voters polled indicated support for the Healthy Teens Act. Nearly 90% percent of voters—from across New York State and across political and religious affiliations—agreed that students should be taught about contraception and the prevention of STIs.¹¹

CONCLUSION: For the above reasons, Planned Parenthood of New York City strongly supports the Healthy Teens Act and urges state lawmakers to pass it without delay.

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¹ Danice K. Eaton, et al., “Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance: United States 2005,” *Surveillance Summaries, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, vol. 55, no. SS-5 (June 9, 2006).

² New York State Department of Health (NYS DOH), *2005 Communicable Disease Annual Reports*, available at <http://www.health.state.ny.us/statistics/diseases/communicable/2005>.

³ NYS DOH, Sexually Transmitted Disease Control Program, *Statistical Abstract 2004*, available at www.health.state.ny.us/diseases/communicable/std/docs/abstract2004.pdf.

⁴ NYS DOH, *Vital Statistics 2004, Table 30*, available at http://www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/vital_statistics/2004/table30.htm.

⁵ Doug Kirby, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, *Emerging Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy (Summary)* (May 2001), available at <http://www.teenpregnancy.org/resources/data/pdf/emeranswsum.pdf>.

⁶ See, e.g., Section 510 of the Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 710(b)(2)(A), (E).

⁷ The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), *Fact Sheet: What the Research Says* (updated June 2006), available at http://www.siecus.org/policy/research_says.pdf.

⁸ SIECUS, *State Profile: New York* (2006).

⁹ Henry A. Waxman, U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform, *The Content of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs* (Dec. 2004); United States Government Accountability Office, *Abstinence Education: Efforts to Assess the Accuracy and Efficacy of Federally Funded Programs* (October 2006).

¹⁰ There is an HIV/AIDS mandate in New York State that requires public schools to teach students—from Kindergarten through 12th grade—about HIV/AIDS prevention and transmission. 8 N.Y.C.R.R. §135.3. But many students aren’t even receiving this mandated instruction. See, e.g., Scott Stringer, *Failing Grade: Health Education in NYC Schools*, June 2003.

¹¹ 76% of suburban voters, 79% of upstate east voters and 77% of upstate west voters; 84% of Democrats, 72% of Republicans, and 75% of Independents; as well as 90% of Catholics, believe students should have information about STI and pregnancy prevention. Lake Research Partners, *Sex Education in New York State: a Presentation on Findings from a Statewide Survey* (April 2006).