

Condoms in the classroom

Ban them, they don't work

By JERRY CAMMARATA

TOMORROW the Board of Education will revisit the city's high school HIV-AIDS curriculum, and it is my hope that it will pass Chancellor Rudy Crew's proposal to ban classroom condom demonstrations. I am basing my vote on the dismal real-life results of condom promotion programs in other big city public school systems.

Consider what happened when students at San Francisco's Balboa High School were given coupons exchangeable for condoms as part of a city AIDS prevention program that also provided them with "graphic demonstrations" of proper condom use. Not surprisingly, student condom use increased dramatically, but so did student sexual activity. At the end of two years, the net result was a disastrous one-fourth increase in the school's pregnancy rate that was almost certainly accompanied by an increase in student exposure to HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Rise in pregnancies

Similar condom promotion programs in other cities have turned out even worse. A St. Paul program meant to reduce births among local teens actually caused them to increase from 22 births per 1,000 teens before the program started to 29 births per 1,000 afterward. In Dallas, an inner city high school that dispensed condoms ended up with an 11.2% overall pregnancy rate that was 1.47 times that in an otherwise identical school that didn't dispense condoms.

What's more, there hasn't been a single documented case — not one — in which promoting condom use has actually reduced student pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases. Given this state of the scientific record, the notion that schools can help curb the spread of AIDS by giving students condoms or exposing them to classroom condom demonstrations must be classified as wishful thinking.

Crew's right. Considering how badly condom promotion has turned out in other school systems, let's not take the same gamble here. Let's keep condom demonstrations out of classrooms and confine them to school clinics and health resource rooms, where students can obtain advice about condom use from competent counselors in privacy.

I realize this will come as a huge disappointment to condom manufacturers who see classroom condom demonstrations as a marvelous way to expand the market for

their products. And I'm sure their allies in organizations like Planned Parenthood and the Gay Men's Health Crisis will try to shrug off the case histories I cited to demonstrate that condom-based sex education seems to cause much more harm than good.

Facts are facts: If anyone wants to argue that promoting condom use by teenagers makes sense, there's a simple way to settle the issue. Let's ask public health experts from Columbia or N.Y.U. or another major university to set up a controlled scientific study to compare the real-life results produced by high school programs that promote condoms with those produced by high school programs that stress abstinence.

The most revealing way to do this: Divide the city's 100 so high schools into two evenly matched groups, promote condoms in one group and abstinence in the other, then compare their respective pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease rates two or three years later. A study of that magnitude would undoubtedly be expensive, so the number of schools studied would have to be based on the amount of outside funding available to defray its costs.

It's just an idea, but wouldn't we be better off knowing what kind of sex education works best instead of just debating it?

Cammarata is the Board of Education's Staten Island representative.

By ERICA ZURER

UNTIL NOW, the New York City schools have been leaders in pursuing policies to combat the epidemic of HIV among young people.

With a new mayor and a new chancellor, that leadership is ending, despite the fact that every single day in our city seven more teenagers are infected with HIV.

Tomorrow, the Board of Education, dominated by its notorious "Gang of Four," will vote to approve a high school HIV/AIDS curriculum written by far-right activists who were placed on the board's AIDS Advisory Council by representatives of Mayor Giuliani and the borough presidents of Queens and Staten Island.

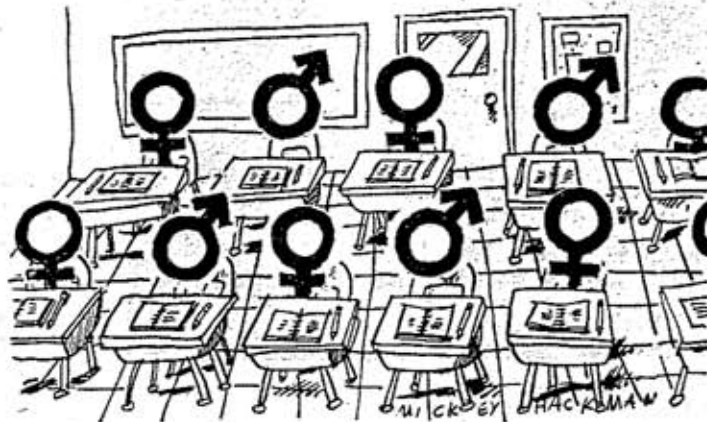
Among the worst elements of this new curriculum is an end to classroom condom demonstrations, a change that will leave city teenagers in life-threatening ignorance.

I'm a parent of two teenagers in the public schools, and I work with other parents through the AIDS and Adolescents Network of New York to help our kids avoid AIDS. We do our best to educate our own children about the risks, but we know that

not all parents can or do do the same thing — and that our efforts alone are not enough.

The schools have a crucial role to play

Should teachers show kids how to use condoms?



in transforming youth culture from one that sustains the epidemic to one in which the virus is stopped. It is a formidable task, since almost no teens with HIV show AIDS symptoms until they are well into their 20s, given the 11-year average delay from infection to illness.

In 1993, a proposed AIDS curriculum was drafted by professional staff and submitted to the AIDS Advisory Council — on which I sit in lonely dissent — for review. Led by Bill Andrews, an anti-gay crusader, this group took two years to rewrite the curriculum to fit its ideology — an outrageous delay, given the desperate need for more information on AIDS in the classrooms.

When the council suggested last year adding concepts such as "secondary virginity" to the seventh-to-ninth-grade AIDS curriculum, then-Schools Chancellor Ramon Cortines rejected them as unsound, educationally and medically.

But now Chancellor Rudy Crew, who has not met with public health officials or experts in AIDS education, has accepted the recommendations of the advisory council lock, stock and barrel.

Condoms equal protection

It is unthinkable that New York would end classroom condom demonstrations. Public health educators have been conducting these demonstrations since 1987, even before the program to make condoms available to public school teenagers was launched in 1991.

Every U.S. surgeon general since C. Everett Koop has counseled that condoms, properly used, are the best prevention against HIV for those who choose to engage in intercourse — and 80% of city students do by age 19.

Of course, we should encourage young people to delay intercourse, but those who don't are entitled to acquire the skills needed to minimize their risk of HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. Parents who don't want their children to participate in prevention classes have the right to remove them — an option fewer than 1% of parents invoke.

We parents are not stupid. We know that this attempt to muzzle teachers from teaching properly about AIDS is not an educational decision but a political one. And we will not forget that Giuliani aligned himself with the Pat Robertson crowd when the lives of our children were on the line.

Zurer is a parent organizer with the AIDS and Adolescents Network of New York.