

Conservative shift in approaches to AIDS

Acceptance of condom opt-out program just one example

The tide in AIDS education has turned more conservative, marking an end to sweeping educational changes by the former schools chancellor, Joseph A. Fernandez.

The Board of Education appears ready to limit the condom-availability program by giving parents the right to stop their children from getting condoms in high schools. Designed by Fernandez, the program in place now allows any student who requests a condom to get one.

The opt-out provision complies with a recent state court decision that requires parental consent for the condom-availability program.

In 1991, the Board voted 4-3 against an opt-out provision. Staten Island board member Michael Petrides and two Island couples challenged the policy in court. The policy, upheld by state Supreme Court Justice Peter P. Cusick, was later reversed by a state appellate court.

Since the opt-out provision was first debated, board member Ninfa Segarra of the Bronx switched sides and joined the opt-out advocates. Now, four of the board's seven members support an opt-out clause.

Petrides last week said a requirement of parental consent reflects what "a majority of people in the city have been saying all along."

The board's liberal members say the board should appeal the court decision. If a vote to appeal is taken, insiders say Petrides, a plaintiff in the suit, would have to recuse himself. His absence from the vote would likely deadlock the board in a 3-3 split.

The change in political waters also has washed over the Board of Education's HIV/AIDS Advisory Council, which shapes AIDS policy.

Last month, 15 of the council's 23 members were bounced, and the new appointments reflect the conservative shift on the Board of Education, according to council members. Each board member appoints three people to the council.

Liberals advocate teaching children accurate information on AIDS prevention and transmission as early as possible. Conservatives say explicit information could harm children who lack maturity, or prompt them to experiment with sex. They advocate abstinence-based lessons.

Edward McCabe, the liberal co-chairman of the council, who's from Staten Island, was not reappointed by Petrides. McCabe regained his seat after Manhattan board member Luis Reyes appointed him. Days later, Board President Carol Gresser notified McCabe that he would no longer serve as co-chair.

The disruption on the council could postpone a new AIDS curriculum for grades seven through nine, which the council has been working on.

"We would have voted on the curriculum within the next two meetings if the board hadn't gutted the council. If it takes more than two meetings, we'll know the disruption was purposeful," said McCabe, who is the assistant director of adolescent medicine at Staten Island University Hospital.

The council and the Board of Education approved an HIV/AIDS curriculum in 1992 for grades kinder-



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SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

garten through six.

On the local level, there's a similar conservatism toward AIDS education. Island school officials are now debating when to tell children that AIDS can be transmitted through vaginal, anal and oral sex. Last year, the board threw out an HIV/AIDS curriculum approved by the Board of Ed and its advisory council, saying the lessons were too explicit.

The board adopted a 1987 state AIDS curriculum, even though state officials said the information was outdated. References to anal, oral and vaginal intercourse were absent from the state guide.

Since then, the state has updated its HIV/AIDS curriculum to include those references and tells teachers to discuss them if the class is ready.

Anthony Polomene, the deputy superintendent of district schools, said the local school board has the final say in whether or not sexual transmission is discussed in detail.

"If the state is giving the teacher discretion, does not the state also give the district discretion on when to introduce the information?" he said.

Community school board member Jerry Cammarata said he believes those kinds of lessons should be taught only with parental consent. And he doesn't think an "opt-out" provision will suffice.

"We need to take a pro-active viewpoint on expunging opt-out. We should have an 'opt-in' program," he said.

Community school board calendar

The Staten Island Community School Board will vote on recommendations by the School-Based Planning and Shared Decision Making Committee tomorrow at 7 p.m. at Laurie Intermediate, New Springville.

At last month's public meeting, the vote was delayed after the Latino Civic Association complained it had been excluded from the committee. Last week, the board and the civic association were still at odds over whether or not the Latino group fit the requirements for inclusion.

The board meeting will be preceded by a public hearing on the district's 1994-95 budget requests and a site selected for a new school, PS 6. The board wants to build the school on a site bounded by Page Avenue, Powers Street, Bartow Avenue and Beecher Place in Tottenville.