

DISTRIBUTION OF CONDOMS IN THE HIGH SCHOOLS

By Alan Singer.

I am a graduate of the New York City school system and a parent. My two daughters graduated from Midwood High School and my son is in seventh grade in District 18. Fourteen months ago, my younger brother died from AIDS. He was 37 years old. His death was very hard on my parents.

As an activist, as an educator, as a parent and as a brother and a son, I am a strong advocate of the plan to distribute condoms in the New York City high schools. But I emphasize that the distribution of condoms is a minimum first step. It won't be a real program to combat AIDS, venereal disease and teenage pregnancy unless it is quickly coupled with plans to build health clinics in all of the high schools, provide counseling, sex education and possibilities for the future. If you can't fund these programs, you must fight for them.

Condom distribution won't work while our schools are being decimated by budget cuts.

Opponents of the plan charge that condom distribution in the schools is misguided and expensive. But they are way off of the mark. Good medical care, birth control, AIDS prevention and condom distribution are relatively inexpensive solutions to major social problems. Currently the United States has the highest teenage pregnancy rate, the highest teenage low birth weight babies in the western world. Health conditions in our urban areas are worse than some third world countries.

And these problems are expensive. What is the cost of hospitalization for an AIDS baby? What are the financial and social costs of thousands of low birth weight babies born to unprepared and unhealthy teenage girls? What is the cost of a lifetime of welfare and homelessness? What is the cost of illiteracy and hopelessness?

Opponents of the plan charge that condom distribution is wasteful. That teenagers will take more than they could possibly use. They are afraid that the condoms will end up as water balloons. So what. It will probably happen at the beginning. But then it will lose its novelty. But the benefits will remain.

Opponents of the plan charge that condom distribution will encourage increased teenage sex. That does not seem to be the case in parts of the world like the Scandinavian countries where sex education and birth control are more readily available. And studies in the United States repeatedly demonstrate that our kids are already "doing it" at younger and younger ages without protection. But what about parents who disagree with their teenage children using condoms? What about religious groups who reject the use of condoms? They will still be free to disagree. They will still be free to influence and persuade. Some of them will still be free to control. But parents don't own their children. And teenagers have a right to explore options. Our society does not tolerate child abuse or neglect. It does not tolerate incest. It will not allow parents to deny their children medical treatment. And in the midst of an AIDS epidemic and an epidemic of teenage pregnancy, it can not let parents or religious groups have a veto over whether the high schools distribute condoms.

When I was sixteen years old and a junior in high school, I got a condom somehow, and began carrying it around in my wallet behind my train pass. I know my father told me to be careful with girls, but we never really discussed what he meant or how to be careful, and I know I didn't get it from him. Sometimes in school I'd show my condom to the guys so that they would know that I was prepared. The condom went to summer camp with me that summer, hidden away with acne medicine and aftershave lotion. I never did get to use that condom. Its packaging deteriorated long before I had the opportunity. Access to condoms doesn't mean teenagers are going to have sex. It means that if they do have sex, it will more likely be safe sex. We live in a society that uses sex to sell products. It uses sex to shape attitudes. It uses sex to manipulate us. Sex is on advertising billboards. Sex is on television. We tell teenagers that sex is the right of passage to adulthood. It's the apple in the garden which they are not allowed to touch. And then we wonder, or are outraged, when they become sexually active.

At another time, in another culture, on another planet, abstinence might be a real answer. But at this time, in this culture, on this planet, the only answer is responsible and safe sexual behavior. And the best places to teach it, the best places to make this possible, are our schools. This does not prevent anyone from arguing for abstinence.

The New York City Board of Education will not solve all of the problems facing our society. But it must take a stand, set a direction, and it can help significant numbers of young people. That is your job.

If this plan is not approved, we are sentencing thousands of young people to unprepared pregnancies, wasted lives and potential death. That is a heavy burden for this Board of Education to carry on its conscience.