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Policies for Schools

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Since the HIV/AIDS epidemic struck Zambia, the projected life expectancy has dropped from 60 years to a tragic 37 years¹. Now with more than half of the 10.3 million persons population under the age of 201, it is absolutely crucial to make every effort to end this horrible epidemic. Working with such a young population makes it absolutely mandatory to focus on the issue of education. It will be the simplest and most effective means of teaching a nation how to help itself.

¹ UNAIDS. *Zambia*. 3 May 2005 <<http://www.unaids.org/en/default.asp>>

Below are some general guidelines on how to approach revamping the educational system such that HIV/AIDS is a critical aspect. Generally speaking, the major issues that need to be addressed can be summarized as including awareness, prevention, testing, and social treatment of those afflicted.

It is easiest to split the system into three levels: primary school, secondary school, and university. Each of these groups should have a formal system to counteract the problem of HIV/AIDS, but require different approaches because of the students' age, comprehension, knowledge, experience, and activities outside of the institution.

At the levels of primary and secondary school, the basic concept of education should come in the form of seminars that will be given regularly throughout every year of schooling to attack the general themes stated above. The curriculum for students between first and sixth grades should include teaching children a general awareness that HIV/AIDS exists all around them and is a problem. They should also be taught how to interact with those people who are afflicted or are associated with someone who is afflicted. A general courtesy should be developed so as to foster acceptance instead of perpetuating the stigmatization that currently pervades the atmosphere.

As the children get older, it is important that they get more information. By sixth grade, right before they begin secondary school, they are becoming mature enough to learn how the disease is contracted. At this point they should be learning about AIDS in greater detail and means of contraction. Since they are technically old enough to start having sex but probably still a little too young and immature to handle it, this is a good time to preach abstinence. That way, when they begin attending secondary school they are not so sheltered as to not understand what it is that the older children are doing, but they are aware of their surroundings and have solid reasons why they should choose abstinence until they are ready.

Upon reaching secondary school, the seminars should add on to what the children were taught in primary school. The curricula should teach students what AIDS is, how it is contracted, how one can prevent spreading of the disease, where one can get tested, what testing entails, what one should do if he/she finds out that he/she is HIV positive, and how one should treat a person who is afflicted. More or less, the answers to these questions should both provide knowledge about the disease, how to prevent it, and how to cope with it (either having it or dealing with those who have it), as well as alleviate any fears associated with getting tested

At the end of secondary school, each school should administer a test about the virus, contraction, prevention, and testing. Passing this exam should be made a mandatory requirement for graduation. This plan should add pressure to each school to teach its students about the disease and emphasize the value of learning about AIDS to the students. At the very least this measure will ensure awareness among all students and faculty, which is at least a step in the right direction.

Along the way, the curriculum should include some or all of the following methods for informing students about HIV/AIDS. The school can show documentaries that describe AIDS so that it provides both information as well as a sense of reality that is intended to induce some fear as a means of preventing unprotected sex.

The school should also encourage speakers of various sorts to come to the school to discuss various aspects on AIDS. A variety of different speakers, including but not limited to young people who are already afflicted, health professionals, entertainment celebrities, and politicians, is essential to try to target the entire audience.

Bringing in young speakers who carry the virus is crucial because peers have the most direct influence on each other and it will be more relevant and have a greater impact than if someone older came in to speak. A feeling of this could happen to me is one of the strongest weapons of prevention and is most easily conveyed when the speaker has things in common with his listener, in this case age.

Health professionals (i.e. nurses, doctors, people who administer HIV tests, etc) can shed a slightly more scientific/medical perspective that should explain the disease in a different light and have better statistical information for students. It will also make approaching health professionals and getting tested more familiar, comfortable, and less frightening.

An important resource to tap for influential power/role models is entertainment celebrities. This approach will try to excite the students to attend these speeches, reach as many students as possible, as well as expand the freedom to openly discuss topics about AIDS.

Finally, the concept of bringing in politicians has multiple aims. There is the general idea of bringing in different types of speakers, the more speakers the better and politicians are also seen as influential people. However, there is another reason for having politicians talk to older students in secondary school. One could believe that if students start learning about the possibilities of governmental influence on issues such as HIV/AIDS that affect them in an interactive way, it will more likely lead to greater voting participation among a younger age group. This would be advantageous for the students trying to voice their opinions as well as the politicians and the government.

Besides speakers, schools could also implement extracurricular activities (i.e. AIDS clubs) that invite students to try to take a more active role in the fight against AIDS by discussing it more freely in open spaces, advertising events, and educating others.

Other activities would include organizing events/performances (i.e. plays) that advocate safe and courteous practices that are related to AIDS. There should also be a great importance placed on the focus of advocating testing among students. Schools should encourage students to get tested by providing free testing that can be subsidized by the government/school system. Another method of encouragement is to offer students a symbol of pride (i.e. red bracelets) for getting tested.

These material symbols would be a one-day-wear much like wearing a pin the day one donates blood. Such an action would make it more widely accepted, regarded as a positive thing for those who do get tested, not frowned down upon for those who do not get tested. It should also encourage fellow peers that the process of getting tested is not frightening. It is also possible to require students to get tested either periodically or at least once right before they complete their schooling in order to get their diploma. This last point is merely one suggestion that would force the issue upon students, but we feel is rather invasive and touches on several issues of privacy and individuality.

At the university level, many of the same plans of action would be suggested, but with the idea of actually targeting the age group the institution is working with. In this respect, there would not be an emphasis on preaching abstinence but on prevention, getting tested, and being open to discussing it in public forums and with one's sexual partners. As with secondary schools, speakers, event/performances, and seminars are encouraged. However these should all be made voluntary and perhaps have more casual get-togethers / meetings that open up discussion by treating these students as mature young adults. Testing should again be highly promoted and made free for all students. One additional step that should be implemented is the free distribution of condoms, placing them in public places throughout campus so that students are knowledgeable about where they are and how they can get them whenever they may need one.

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