

HIV-AIDS Curriculum To Expand In the Fall

'We're in a Crisis,' Rhee's Assistant Says

By [Susan Levine](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

Thursday, January 17, 2008; Page DZ03

With the city in "a crisis," public school officials are promising that a comprehensive HIV-AIDS curriculum will be in place by the fall.

The push follows long-delayed endorsement of health and physical education standards detailing what public and charter school students should know about more than a half -dozen topics such as reproduction, the human body, nutrition and drugs. Approval came last month with a unanimous vote of the D.C. State Board of Education, a day after the nearly 50,000-student public school system got a D on a report card issued by an independent advocacy group grading the city's response to the AIDS epidemic.

Starting in fifth grade and continuing into high school, youths are to receive increasingly detailed instruction. By the middle grades, for example, they should be able to describe the causes, symptoms and treatment of HIV, as well as the stigma and discrimination often directed at people who are infected. By their senior year, they will be challenged to analyze the effects of research and medical advances on this and other diseases.

Abstinence as "the most effective way to prevent disease or pregnancy" is introduced in fifth grade and becomes a recurrent theme into high school.

But these measures are just the framework, "a beginning, a means, not an end," said Richard Nyankori, special assistant to [Schools Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee](#). The next, equally big step is deciding how to teach them and what materials to use. According to Nyankori, the public schools' own curriculum won't be ready until late 2009, after guides and sample lessons are developed and tested with focus groups, including community members. The lessons to be used starting in September will be borrowed from programs developed elsewhere.

Increased teacher training is to begin in the summer. Rhee has pledged to put a qualified health education teacher in every public middle and high school.

"We know that there's a need to have immediate HIV education," Nyankori said. "We're in a crisis."

Charter schools are supposed to ensure that their curricula reflect the standards, although the state education board's vote did not carry a deadline for doing so. "Clearly it would be to the benefit of students, for their survival really, to have that information," said Nona Richardson, a spokeswoman for the D.C. Public Charter School Board.

The lagging momentum on HIV-AIDS instruction here has been a sore point for several years and at odds with District officials' increasingly vocal acknowledgment of the epidemic's impact

locally. Surveys have suggested that students were actually learning less, not more, about the virus.

"It took way too long to get to these standards," said [Walter Smith](#) of the D.C. Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, an independent advocacy organization that has evaluated agencies' efforts to reverse the city's high rates of infection. Its next report card will hold the schools even more accountable on curriculum development, he said. "We're going to be very, very critical if they haven't made substantial forward progress."

[Adam Tenner](#), executive director of the nonprofit group Metro TeenAIDS, is similarly hopeful and wary. He wants to see future curricula incorporate HIV and AIDS into more than just health or even science classes. He sees history and language arts courses as areas where key issues related to the epidemic could be taught.

"My hope is the schools will look for those opportunities," said Tenner, who helped craft the education standards. "The fact that [they] come so late in the game is tragic but moot."

Despite the state board's 6-0 vote on the legislation, it faced opposition. Two District pastors signed a clergy letter expressing concern that students would be exposed to certain values unacceptable to many families. They highlighted discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity starting in sixth grade, and contraception in seventh grade. "These are issues that do not belong in the classroom," their letter stated.