

Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Speech for the National Coalition to Support Sexuality Education
May 24, 2005

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak today. I want to commend all of you for your work providing accurate, comprehensive, and potentially lifesaving information to teenagers. This is a challenging time for those of us who want to see science and evidence inform education on sexuality. I want you to know how much your efforts are appreciated.

I also want you to know that I've seen how in difficult times, the kind of work you do is so crucial.

Nearly 25 years ago, the first cases of what came to be known as AIDS were described in gay men in Los Angeles in my congressional district. And Ronald Reagan was the President.

President Reagan ignored AIDS. Years passed before he even mentioned the disease—and only then to call for counterproductive actions. Meanwhile, fears and myths spread. Children with AIDS were thrown out of school and their families ostracized. People with AIDS lost their jobs, their homes, and their privacy. A terrible stigma became associated with the disease.

But the public health community found its voice. As chairman of the Health Subcommittee of the Energy and Commerce Committee, I held dozens of hearings to set the facts before the public and to press the government to pay attention.

Scientific experts testified that HIV is not spread by sweat or by tears. It is spread in part by high-risk sexual contact, and the use of condoms is highly effective in preventing transmission.

This message was carried throughout the country by organizations like yours. And gradually, the fears and myths of AIDS receded to the fringes. Confronting a know-nothing conservative Administration, the public health community had learned how to fight back and how to win.

We need to draw strength from this experience today.

We are confronting another ideological Administration. I would even say this is a more ideological Administration. Unlike the Reagan Administration, the Bush Administration is not just ignoring the facts—although it is clearly doing that.

It is also distorting the facts to dress up a myth-based approach to sexuality as pseudo-science.

For example, in November 2000, under the Clinton Administration, the Department of Health and Human Services had developed meaningful, scientific measures to see whether abstinence programs achieved what they were intended to. They planned to measure things like the proportion of participants who had sex, and the proportion of female participants who gave birth.

But in late 2001, the Bush Administration dropped these measures and replaced them with a set of standards that don't include any real outcomes. Instead of tracking pregnancy or sexual activity, the measures assess attendance and the attitudes of teens at the end of the education program, like the "proportion of participants who indicate understanding of the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from premarital sexual activity." But we know that attitudes and intentions are not good predictors of teen behavior. Measuring them might make programs look effective, even when they are not.

In 2002, the Administration censored a portion of the CDC website called "Programs that Work" that had highlighted effective comprehensive sex education programs. As a result, the programs were not visible models for other groups.

Later in 2002, the National Institutes of Health became a target of attack.

Until that fall, the National Cancer Institute had a fact sheet on its web site explaining that scientific evidence doesn't support the claim that abortions increased the risk of breast cancer. This claim had been invalidated by several well-designed studies, the largest of which was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1997.

But in November 2002, the Bush Administration removed the old fact sheet and posted new information about abortion and breast cancer on the NCI website. The new fact sheet falsely suggested that whether abortion caused breast cancer was an open question with studies of equal weight supporting both sides.

To its credit, after members of Congress protested the website changes, the National Cancer Institute convened a three-day conference on the subject. Participants reviewed all existing population-based, clinical, and animal data available, and concluded that "Induced abortion is not associated with an increase in breast cancer risk." The NCI website was updated to reflect this conclusion.

As such examples of political distortion of science were becoming known, the Administration was pouring money into a program that exemplified the triumph of politics over scientific evidence. I am talking about so-called "abstinence only" education. About a year ago, I asked my staff to investigate the most popular abstinence-only curricula being used by federally-funded programs.

The results, as you may know, were appalling. Of the thirteen most popular curricula, eleven had serious medical and scientific errors or contained misleading information.

Now, a few of these errors may have been honest mistakes. For example, one program said that humans get 24 chromosomes from each parent, when the real number is 23.

But what struck me is that most of the errors, the distortions, and the misleading information seemed to support an ideological agenda.

For example, the curricula did not just provide wrong data on condoms: Failure rates were exaggerated or misstated. Benefits were dismissed. Condoms were depicted as flimsy and porous. The consistent message was not to trust condoms for protection.

Similarly, errors or omissions about cervical cancer were not simple misstatements. Instead, many of the curricula – which did not even mention the life-saving importance of pap smears - implied that premarital sex was likely to result in a deadly illness.

And one curriculum even stated that HIV can be transmitted through tears and sweat. The same myths again ... to frighten a new generation.

Our report attracted a lot of attention – not only from the news media, but also from the public. The response illustrates that slowly but surely, facts have a way of prevailing against ideological pressure. For example, in DeKalb County Georgia, the school district suspended its abstinence-only program – based on one of the problematic curricula – after parents brought the errors and misinformation to the superintendent's attention.

In addition, some of the publishers have issued some errata about some of their mistakes. They even took out the allegation about tears and sweat. Many problems still remain, and we have a long way to go. But eventually, even major reversals can be achieved.

Proponents of ideologically-based abstinence-only education may have political power on their side. But they do not have science. Fundamentally, that's what parents want driving their kids' education.

You may have to fight for every step, but when you stick to the science, you are walking on solid ground. And I am proud to be there with you.

Thank you very much for your time.

