

AIDS

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"It's kind of vague, but that's what we wanted. We tried to keep it very open."

Along with the diocesan policy, Brother Walsh outlined for principals a series of administrative procedures, such as whom to contact in order to confirm whether a student has AIDS or what degree of confidentiality school personnel ought to observe. "Once they have confirmed a student with AIDS, they simply call me," Brother Walsh said.

The policy does not relieve the local school community of all responsibility for decision making. Since each diocesan school is an entity independent of the diocesan office, any action in regard to a student with AIDS would still depend on reaching some kind of consensus between the school superintendent, the local principal, the school board, pastor and school parents. Thus, each school community will also remain responsible for developing policies regarding AIDS at the local level.

Most administrators of schools, whether public or private, "aren't wanting to be leaders on this," observed Joseph A. Meskill, principal of Immaculate Conception School in Ithaca, and a former public school administrator.

For that reason, Meskill and most other principals who were contacted welcomed the diocesan initiative. "I am extremely glad that it's being acted upon," said Steven Schockow, principal of Seton Junior High School and Our Lady of Lourdes School in Brighton. "Cases like those in Florida and Indiana (where controversy and violent protests erupted over whether to admit students who had AIDS or who carried the AIDS virus) are examples of people caught off guard. I would hate to see that happen here."

Holy Trinity Principal Mary Caffrey regards the diocesan policy as groundwork for individual schools. "What the diocese has done is to try to address a problem before it actually happened," she said. "To say that things will be looked at on a case-by-case basis, I think, is the only compassionate way to handle something like that."

Similarly, many diocesan principals received drafts of the Regents' curriculum guideline for teaching about AIDS in August. But most were awaiting guidance from the diocesan Division of Education before implementing any kind of AIDS instruction.

Meanwhile, Evelyn J. Kirst, diocesan assistant superintendent for curriculum, said she hoped that the New York State Council of Catholic School Administrators would offer dioceses some guidance on the Regents' curriculum once a final version is approved.

That's not likely to happen, according to McTighe. "We're not planning on recommending (the state's guideline) for use in Catholic schools," he said. "It would have to be revised considerably before we could recommend it."

At the state level, however, the Catholic school administrators' council is establishing a task force, including representatives from all eight dioceses, that will develop and identify resources for use in Catholic school AIDS-education programs, he said.

The problem, as McTighe, Kirst and many principals agreed, is that the Regents' guidelines fail to address the moral aspects of issues raised by AIDS. McTighe argues, for instance, with any designation of condoms as a means of "safe sex" not only because their use is prohibited by Church teaching, but also because

of their failure rate, which has been estimated at up to 17 percent. "We'd be telling kids a pretty big and potentially lethal lie if we told them they could have safe sex with condoms," he said.

Kirst has read the Regents' curriculum draft and found it to be "very, very thorough."

"There's nothing in it that's specifically opposed to Church teaching in it, but it does really stress AIDS as a sexually transmitted disease, as opposed to other aspects of transmission," she said. "That indicates, I think, that they may have moved a little too quickly. The information we do eventually give out we want to be accurate, especially since so much concern has been raised."

Along with other members of the diocesan Task Force for Adolescent Sexuality, Kirst has already written a section on AIDS to be added to the diocesan sex-education curriculum, which was revised this fall. But the section consists only of a brief paragraph defining the disease.

In cooperation with Anne Wegman, associate director of youth ministry for human sexuality, Kirst has also been meeting with school sex-education coordinators to organize a "broad-based program" of AIDS education for teachers and other school staff members. Some schools, including St. Andrew's in Rochester, have already offered teachers in-service programs on AIDS.

In response to the diocesan initiative, Stephen M. Oberst, principal of St. Pius Tenth School in Chili, intends to review AIDS-related issues with staff, faculty and board members in the next few meetings in preparation for developing local policies. "It's an issue no administrator would like to have to face head on, but sometimes when you are being a good Catholic Christian, you have to do things that are not exactly popular," he said. "You can't shirk your moral Catholic responsibility ... but you also have to be sensitive to the health and safety of your school children and employees. "It's an issue that needs to be treated with an awful lot of common sense," he added.

Small grants to food providers offered by Social Ministry office

The Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry recently announced the availability of small grants to emergency food providers in Cayuga, Ontario, Seneca, Wayne and Yates counties. Organizations must be not-for-profit and must provide food in their communities on an emergency and no-cost basis. Organizations funded in the past typically include emergency food cupboards, soup kitchens, and overnight shelters.

Funds for this small grant program are made available from donations to Operation Breadbox, a hunger education and support program of the Rochester diocese. Families in parishes across the diocese contribute to Operation Breadbox each Lenten season. Three-quarters of the donated funds support economic self-help projects in the Philippines, the African Republic of Benin and the Tabasco province of Mexico.

At the same time, one-quarter of the funds raised through Operation Breadbox remain in the diocese to support emergency food efforts.

Application forms are available from the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry, Operation Breadbox, 110 Exchange St., Geneva or call (315) 789-2686. Application forms must be postmarked by Wednesday, Sept. 30.

The Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry is a regional office of the Rochester diocese with office locations in Geneva and Auburn.

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