

# The New York Times

## Board to Vote on Condoms in Boston Schools

The Boston School Committee is set to vote Wednesday night on a new health policy that would make condoms available in the district's high schools, bringing this city in line with New York and Los Angeles.

It was more than 20 years ago that those cities, along with many others, made the controversial decision to distribute condoms in schools, in part to counteract the spread of H.I.V./AIDS. But since then, widespread distribution of condoms in schools has made halting progress — a 2006 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that condoms were provided in just 5 percent of the nation's high schools, although that number may have risen since then.

Some schools have taken piecemeal approaches: in Chicago, condom availability is decided by a school's principal, while Philadelphia has added condom dispensers in some of its schools.

"Most would agree that the absolute number of schools offering such services has increased over the past 10 years or so," said Bill Albert, the chief program officer of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Boston first began distributing condoms in some high schools through school health centers in the mid-1990s. Officials said they initially thought those centers, working in tandem with community health centers that provided condoms, were a major step toward providing students with adequate sexual health resources. About three years ago, a coalition of community groups and a new city councilor at large, Ayanna Pressley, began calling for broader access and a more comprehensive policy to counteract the unevenness of sexual health education and resources that persisted from school to school.

"I think over time we've come to realize we're not doing as good a job as we need to," said Barbara Ferrer, the city's public health commissioner, adding, "Your ability to be healthy shouldn't depend on which high school you go to in the city of Boston."

Genesis Bautista, 18, who just graduated from Fenway High School and has supported the new policy, said she

received sexual education but decided to become a peer educator to work with students who were not getting such teaching.

"It's shocking how much they don't know," Ms. Bautista said. "All the information comes from the media, it comes from porn, it comes from word of mouth."

A 2011 survey by the Boston Public Health Commission, citing data from the C.D.C., found that 54 percent of Boston's high school students had had sexual intercourse — slightly higher than the national rate for that year, 47 percent. Of the sexually active respondents, nationally, 60 percent said they had used a condom the last time they had sex.

The new proposal calls for counseling with the condoms, both to be provided to students by community health partners, the city health commission or trained staff members at each high school — with an opt-out option for parents.

It also requires that students receive sexuality education — something that is currently available in roughly 60 percent of the district's 35 or so high schools, according to Jill Carter, the executive director of the schools' health and wellness department.

"Students will get sexual health education in a class. Then, if they wanted access to the condoms, they would actually have one-on-one counseling with someone that's trained," Ms. Carter said. "We recognize that if we want them to make these healthy choices," she added, "we need to make sure that it's not a barrier for them to actually get the condoms."

The change was presented this month at a hearing. No one testified against it, and school committee members did not raise criticisms of it.

The Archdiocese of Boston, however, said in a statement that it is "very concerned" about the new proposal. "Young people deserve far better from their educators and their community leaders than a misguided and unfortunate proposal to make condoms readily available," it read.

