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MARCH 5, 2009

Students with HIV, report to the principal's office

Mandatory reporting requirements discourage students from being tested

 BY [R. L. NAVE](#)

Twenty years ago, when the Illinois General Assembly approved a law requiring that school principals be notified whenever a student tests positive for the human immune deficiency virus, it was widely believed that children could catch HIV during a game of tag.

Much better information about HIV exists today. With infection rates among people under 24 on the rise, advocates for children with HIV/AIDS are working to repeal the law, which they believe discourages young people from being tested.

Cathy Krieger, executive director of the Children's Place, a Chicago-based nonprofit that works with kids with HIV/AIDS and their families, calls the notification law a relic. Her group cites Illinois Department of Public Health data from November 2007 showing a 60 percent spike in HIV cases among people under the age of 24 since 2000, which demonstrates the necessity of removing barriers to testing.

"The disclosure of a student's HIV status creates a deceptive sense of security for students and teachers alike because the HIV status of many people — students and staff — is unknown and unreported," Krieger says.

In March 2008, a bill that would have repealed the provision of the state's communicable disease act was defeated in the House, proponents say, because lawmakers felt they didn't have enough information. But while last year's campaign focused largely on the issue of deterrence to testing, this time supporters are making their appeal on medical grounds.

"There's the potential that any student could have a blood-borne, disease," says David Ormsby, a Children's Place spokesman. "As long as schools adhere to universally accepted medical practices, they reduce the chance of transmission."

Nationally, Illinois ranks sixth among the states in overall HIV/AIDS infection rates. According to the Illinois Department of Public Health, more than 4,500 cases of HIV had been reported in Illinois as of July 1999 among people ages 20 to 29. HIV is the also the sixth leading cause of death in Illinois for 25- to 44-year-olds — people who are likely to have contracted the virus as teenagers.

Just four other states have reporting mandates similar to the one in Illinois. Jason Leahy, executive director of the Illinois Principals Association, believes that repealing HIV notification might conflict with school officials' "in loco parentis" (in place of parent) rights.

"As officials, we're required to watch and care for these kids. When you have a bill like this that infringes on that care, it causes a bit of concern," he says.

However, the current legislation, sponsored by Democratic state Rep. LaShawn Ford of Chicago,



Mary (whose identity needs to be protected) is a 22-year-old Illinois college student who did not disclose her HIV status. "No one knows I was born with HIV, not even my whole family, no one in college and none of my friends know," she says.
 PHOTO BY ANTONIO PEREZ/MCT



doesn't prohibit principals from being notified. Instead, that decision is left to the child's parents and physician, says Scott Allen, who heads the Illinois chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, which is backing Ford's bill.

Pediatricians agree that mandatory reporting deters teens from finding out their HIV status. "There's simply no reason for this," to remain on the books, Allen says.

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