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## Unanimous Vote for Comprehensive Sex Ed

By Cathy Tyson



Protestors held up signs during a discussion about sex education at the April 15 Acalanes Union High School District board meeting. Photo Cathy Tyson

The packed house at the Del Valle Theater - and the pair of police officers posted out front - was a heads up that the Acalanes Union High School District meeting to adopt their updated, clarified policy on sexual health and HIV/AIDS prevention could get heated.

After listening politely to 56 public speakers, both in favor and against potential policy changes, school board members voted unanimously to establish recommended comprehensive and medically accurate policy and guidelines for the district.

Right up front, Superintendent Dr. John Nickerson calmly explained that the AUHSD follows the California State Standards and the district has a responsibility to provide age-appropriate objective scientific information as part of its educational program. He also explained that "abstinence only" education alone is prohibited in the state of California, due to academic research that demonstrates higher levels of sexually transmitted infections and a higher level of teen pregnancy. It

is, however, included in instruction along with other information about the effectiveness and safety of all federal FDA-approved methods of reducing the risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections, along with contraceptive methods.

To address many opponents who requested the instruction provider consultant would not be Planned Parenthood, Nickerson explained there are strict criteria for providers. He said the AUHSD has examined a number of potential consultants including the American Red Cross, Teen Esteem and the Contra Costa Office of Education - all of which "don't fulfill the criteria."

"We value parents participation and want parents to be aware," said the superintendent. He went on to explain that principals at the district high schools have said "no" to parents attending classroom sex education discussions because parents would affect the discussion, and student privacy issues would be problematic.

Instead, parents were invited to a parent education night to see instructional materials prior to student instruction, but no one showed up.

Lengthy comments were all over the map. One particularly memorable one came from an Acalanes graduate, class of 2005, who said, "I still remember facts that I learned in my ninth grade class that were relevant and medically accurate."

Garnering a standing ovation, a transgender parent spoke of her painful journey, fearing for her life, and living with depression. "I don't want my daughters to be bullied," she said. She was in support of the program. Over 1,000 signatures were gathered on a Change.org petition in support of continuing the program throughout the AUHSD.

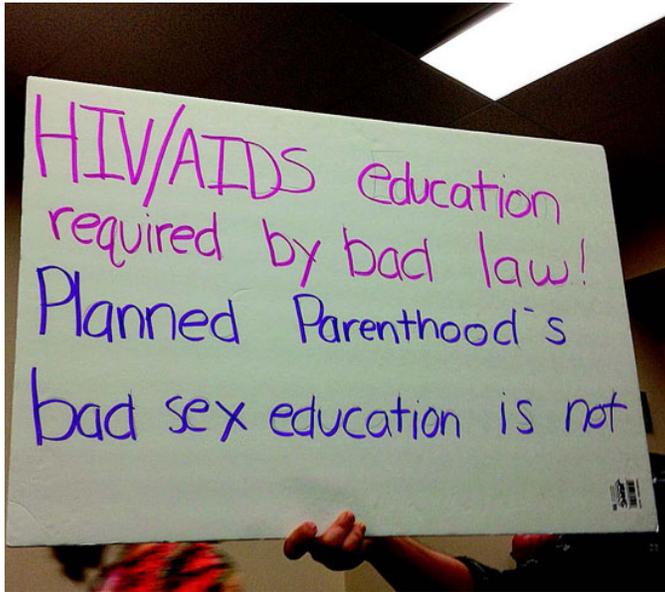
Opponents included Camille Giglio of NOISE, No to Irresponsible Sex Education, who called it "nothing more than a charade." Several speakers felt Planned Parenthood is promoting its agenda and has a political bias. Wendy Lack said, "Planned Parenthood is on the leading edge of opposing religious freedom."

Explaining her decision, longtime school board member Kathy Coppersmith expressed her frustration. "The bigger issue that I've never seen before is our district being used as a forum for a

cause by people from mostly outside our community. This has nothing to do with right to life or pro-choice." The audience responded with shouts of "Thank you!"

School board member Richard Whitmore pointed out that the data matters a lot, parents have the right to opt-out, and in reality very few students opted out of the program - a strong signal it's supported. He was "increasingly disappointed" at the lack of civil discourse, especially the online stalking of instructors. Whitmore voiced his whole-hearted support of district staff in their tactful response to parent concerns and said that tolerance matters, and that LGBT students deserve a safe and welcoming environment.

Newest school board member Bob Hockett reviewed the language of the policy. "The board recognized that the purpose of the district's sexual health and HIV/AIDS prevention instruction is to provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to protect them from unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, and to encourage students to develop understanding and healthy attitudes concerning adolescent growth and development, body image, gender, sexual orientation, dating, marriage and family." He concluded: "I find it difficult to think that anyone wouldn't support that."



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