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December 9, 2009

The Honorable James R. Roebuck, Jr.  
Chairman, House Education Committee  
208 Irvis Office Building  
PO Box 202188  
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2188

Dear Chairman Roebuck,

The American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania (ACLU-PA), on behalf of its approximately 16,000 members throughout the state, expresses its support of House Bill 1162 and House Bill 1163- The Notice Home Act and Healthy Youth Act. Founded in 1920, the ACLU is one of America's oldest civil rights organizations and today boasts of a nationwide membership of approximately half a million people, a number that has doubled since 2001.

Sexuality is fundamental to who we are as human beings and how we build relationships and connect with other people. Education programs that include age-appropriate, medically-accurate unbiased information about sexuality teach our students about who they are, rather than relying on fear and mistruths to ignore fundamental aspects of human development. The Notice Home Act and the Healthy Youth Act will make great strides to ensure that all Pennsylvania youth are taught vital information to help them develop the tools they need to learn safe and healthy behaviors, free of religious connotation, group discrimination and gender bias.

Abstinence-only-until- marriage sexuality programs promote an inherent religious message based on fear rather than offering health-related information to help teens make healthy and safe decisions. Offering tax-payer money to fund religious programming in public schools is clearly unconstitutional. However, abstinence-only programs are tinged with a religious message because of the emphasis of sex only in the context of heterosexual marriage. This narrow view of appropriate sexuality is detrimental to the physical and emotional health of Pennsylvania youth.

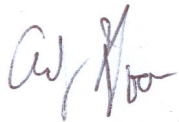
A comprehensive approach to sex education would offer medically-accurate and unbiased information for all youth in the state. Abstinence-only programs ignore Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) youth and in doing so dismisses their health needs altogether. LGBT youth are at increased risk of bullying and have higher rates of suicide. According to a 2009 research brief from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 98 percent of LGBT students in Pennsylvania reported hearing the word "gay" used in a derogatory way, 83 percent heard slurs on a

regular basis, and 88 percent were verbally harassed in the past year due to their sexual orientation. It would be in the best interest of Pennsylvania youth and public schools in the state to have a sex education curriculum that is inclusive of all youth and that works to normalize rather than “otherize” segments of the population.

Abstinence-only programs also rely heavily on gender stereotypes of male and female sexuality. The gender stereotypes that abstinence-only curricula contain are particularly harmful to young women, by portraying the woman as keeper of both her and her male partner’s virginity. Abstinence-only curricula reinforce traditional gender roles and inhibit young men and women from articulating healthy feelings and needs. Most abstinence-only texts fail to meaningfully discuss rape, sexual assault, or coercion, and even fewer give guidance to victims of sexual violence. Adolescent victims of sexual assault and/or past and current sexually active teens can feel shamed by or left out of the abstinence-only approach to sex education all together.

Comprehensive sex education provides teens with balanced and accurate information free of religious biases and value judgments and protects the interests of all teens, regardless of their religious, cultural, or sexual identity. To ensure that Pennsylvania’s sex education curriculum presents medically accurate, age-appropriate, unbiased information about sex and sexuality, we ask you to pass HBs 1162 and 1163.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Andy Hoover". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "A" and "H".

Andy Hoover  
Legislative Director

CC: House Education Committee