

13 April 2010

David A Fox, Chair
Metro Nashville Public School Board
Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools
2601 Bransford Avenue
Nashville TN 37204



Chairman Fox and members of the MNPS School Board:

Thank you for this opportunity to provide information about Survivor Club, an HIV prevention program of Nashville CARES, and to address concerns about the program expressed by Mr. Rodrick Glover and the Alliance Defense Fund.

Survivor Club is not a regular health or family life education class. It is an intensive, 20-hour program which trains adolescents to become peer HIV educators. HIV is a public health crisis. Unfortunately, thousands of young people become infected with HIV every year. Survivor Club is designed to help adolescents stay free of HIV infection.

Survivor Club is one of several “service learning projects” available to Metro Public High Schools as part of the Developing Community Leaders (DCL) core of Alignment Nashville. Nashville CARES has a separate program which provides greatly circumscribed education in MNPS health classes, often in conjunction with the peer educators we train through Survivor Club.

As a training program, Survivor Club content is detailed and biologically accurate. Content is based on recommendations from expert professionals at the Centers for Disease Control, the American Medical Association, and other national health organizations. We explain the explicit nature of the training to teens and their parents/guardians before the start of the program. The program seeks parent/guardian consent for student participation, and we have always been willing and have discussed the program content, shown parents materials and answered any questions they may have. We do this not only because of the program’s coverage of uncomfortable issues around sex and sexuality. We also do it because parental involvement is part of the training and students are actively encouraged to talk to parents about the issues in the course as part of their leaning activities. So a parent’s understanding about the program is an important part of the training itself especially to help teens establish their own sexual health values.

Usually Survivor Club operates as an extracurricular club outside regular school time. At Hillsboro, we were asked by Ms. Frensey to offer the training in their Leadership Class, to increase access for students. This made the number of students in the training larger than our usual program. However, we understood that the course was still an elective not offered to every student, and any student and/or their parent/guardian could opt out of the program, an option no parent selected, including Mr. Glover, despite the detailed permission form they all received prior to the training.

Since the Survivor Club training was being offered within the school day, we worked with the teacher to obtain the consent for student participation that is a regular part of the program. Ms. Frensley crafted a comprehensive consent form that combined the state-recommended form, the district form and CARES own parent consent form, and sent it to parents under her signature and that of our program coordinator. *(A copy of that consent form is enclosed.)* Apparently one signature was not collected, in spite of our good faith effort to conform to our own program guidelines as well as our obligations under the Alignment Nashville process, MNPS policy and school education law. Based on what we have learned from this situation, we have reviewed our own protocols to make sure that consent is secured for all participants prior to the start of the program without exception in the future.

In retrospect, the unusual classroom format in which the training program was offered at Hillsboro High School created a basic confusion about what Survivor Club is. This confusion highlighted challenges around the removal of a student who lacks both a parent's consent to participate as well as his/her consent to opt out. We hope to work with MNPS to resolve these specific challenges. We very much encourage parent involvement as we work to help keep their children safe from a serious public health risk.

It is important to understand that, despite some of the claims that have been made, we do not promote or encourage any type of sexual behavior. Rather, Survivor Club discusses all ways to prevention HIV infection, abstinence as well as safer sex, without promoting one form of behavior over another. Indeed, the whole point of Survivor Club training is to teach teenagers to make healthy and informed choices that are consistent with their own personal, family, religious and cultural values. In fact, ongoing evaluation of Survivor Club shows that, as a result of the training, a majority of teens in the program continue to delay sexual behavior or choose to become abstinent if they have been sexually active in the past. These findings are consistent with scientific research that documents that comprehensive education does not lead to an increase in sexual activity.

Yes, the program is detailed in its depiction of reproductive anatomy and description of sexual risk behaviors. But it is neither lewd nor immoral. Exactly the opposite.

We hope that we can work with MNPS to resolve this matter so that Survivor Club can continue to address the larger goal we share—keeping our young people healthy and safe so that they can become successful and productive adults.

Sincerely,

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