An Act relative to healthy youth provides schools with the choice to enhance their sex education curricula with medically accurate and realistic materials. This bill gives students, parents, and school districts a choice to support teenage health through scientifically proven, age-appropriate sex education. Other states such as Maine, Colorado, and California have adopted these curricula and have seen a sharp drop in teenage sexual activity as well as an increase in safer sex and healthier relationship behaviors.

The Bill
H.450: An Act relative to healthy youth.

Excerpt from Storybook
What's the problem?
- Teens don't know the facts because no one wants to talk about sex.
- By denying these kids access to this information, Massachusetts is preventing them from living happy and healthy lives.
- Half of high school students have had sex but less than half used protection.
  ‘One girl believed that if she got up and jumped up and down after having sex that would reduce her risk of getting pregnant … another believed that PCP/angel dust’ was like birth control in that it might reduce the chance of getting pregnant.’ [Diana Detting, Women's Health Nurse Practitioner]

Elevator Speech
Hi, my name is Roberta Bergstein and these are my colleagues, Hailey Magee and Emily Troge. I am a Massachusetts voter and a student at Brandeis University, a school known for its dedication to social justice. My colleagues and I are working with the Coalition for Choice. We want Massachusetts teens to be healthy and safe, but we can only achieve this goal if we provide teens with the information they need to

Hailey Magee '15, Emily Troge '14 and Roberta Bergstein '14
make smart, responsible choices. We would like to discuss with you H.450/S.209, An Act relative to healthy youth, which will help teens get the information they deserve to make healthy choices that could impact the trajectory of their lives.

Currently in the Commonwealth, 45% of students between the ages of 13 and 19 are sexually active. Of these, about 40% report having unprotected sex because they are not taught the importance of safe sexual choices. This problem exists in the Commonwealth because many teens are not receiving the medically accurate sex education they need to make safe sexual decisions.

This problem is easily fixed by H.450, An Act relative to healthy youth, which provides schools with the choice to enhance their sex education curricula with medically accurate and realistic materials. This bill gives students, parents, and school districts a choice to support teenage health through scientifically proven, age-appropriate sex education. Other states such as Maine, Colorado, and California have adopted these curricula and have seen a sharp drop in teenage sexual activity as well as an increase in safer sex and healthier relationship behaviors.

Something we love about this bill is that it is revenue neutral, and will save the Commonwealth money over time because it is a preventative program. An Act relative to healthy youth is scheduled for a hearing in the Joint Committee on Education on May 14, and we ask that you and your colleagues favorably vote the bill out of committee.

Letter to the legislator

Dear Senator Barrett,

My name is Roberta Bergstein. I am a Massachusetts voter and a student at Brandeis University. I, along with my colleagues Hailey Magee and Emily Troge, am working with the Massachusetts Coalition for Choice to promote H.450/S.209, An Act relative to healthy youth. As a father of two, you understand that the health of Massachusetts youth is a universal concern; children must be given every possible opportunity to lead healthy lives. Unfortunately, Massachusetts has not done everything in its power to ensure that our youth can make smart, safe choices that will positively impact their health and, ultimately, their future.

Too many Massachusetts teens partake in unhealthy, unsafe sexual behaviors. About 40% of sexually active teens in Massachusetts report having had unprotected sex, often leading to teen pregnancy or the contraction of sexually transmitted infections. Teens partake in risky sexual behaviors because they have not been informed of the dangers of unprotected sex. Teens that unintentionally become pregnant or contract sexually transmitted infections must deal with the consequences of their unhealthy choices for the rest of their lives. Luckily, the solution to this dire problem is simple: comprehensive sexual education has been proven to reduce rates of sexual activity as well as unintended pregnancy among teens.

An Act relative to healthy youth (S.209) would require all Massachusetts schools offering sexual education to utilize comprehensive curricula that are medically accurate. These curricula would detail abstinence, contraception, STIs, HIV/AIDS, safe sexual activity, and the formation of healthy and respectful relationships. I am asking you to speak to your colleagues in the Joint Committee on Education, and urge them to vote An Act Relative to Healthy Youth favorably out of committee after its hearing on May 14. As a Massachusetts legislator, you are in a position to ensure that children and teens are given the information and knowledge necessary to prevent teen pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted infections – and, as such, the opportunity to lead healthy lives.

The purpose of An Act relative to healthy youth is to give schools, parents, and children options for living healthier lives. It is not a mandate, and would not require schools to offer sexual education; rather, it would help schools already offering such education to ensure that their curricula are complete and effective. It would also uphold the current provision of the law stating that parents may opt their children out of school sexual education if they so desire. Furthermore, An Act Relative to Healthy Youth is a revenue-neutral bill; it does not require that the government spend additional resources. In fact, as a preventative measure, the bill will save the Commonwealth millions of dollars that would otherwise be spent on welfare and MassHealth programs for unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

As a legislator and a father, the health of Massachusetts youth must be one of your foremost priorities. Please ensure that our youth are kept healthy and safe by supporting An Act relative to healthy youth, and urging your fellow legislators in the Joint Committee on Education to vote the bill favorably out of committee.

House Ways and Means Script

Hello Chair Dempsey and members of the House Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Roberta Bergstein and these are my colleagues, Hailey Magee and Emily Troge. I am a Massachusetts voter and a student at Brandeis University, an institution known for its passion for social justice. We
are working with the Coalition for Choice on H.450, An Act relative to healthy youth, which provides our youth with the means to make healthy and responsible choices.

Chair Dempsey, as a father of three, you understand that the health of Massachusetts youth is a universal concern; children must be given every possible opportunity to lead healthy lives. Unfortunately, Massachusetts has not done everything in its power to ensure that our youth can make smart, safe choices that will positively impact their health and, ultimately, their future. Teen's sexual health is of particular concern because roughly half of Massachusetts’s teens are sexually active — and half of those teens do not have protected sex. Clearly, many of our teens are not informed about safe, healthy sexual choices — and, as a result, are at risk for unhealthy relationships, sexually transmitted infections, and unintended pregnancies.

An Act relative to healthy youth, H.450, provides a solution to this dire problem by empowering and informing Massachusetts teens. H.450 states that schools already choosing to offer sex education must utilize curricula that are medically accurate and age-appropriate. This bill gives students, parents, and school districts a choice to support teenage health through scientifically proven, age-appropriate sex education. Currently, many sex education curricula lack vital information about healthy relationships, sexually transmitted infections, teenage pregnancy, and methods of protection. Comprehensive curricula, on the other hand, would include these subjects. Other states that have adopted these curricula, including Maine, Colorado, and California, have seen a sharp drop in teenage sexual activity as well as an increase in safer sex and healthier relationship behavior, proving that students participating in the program absorb the information that is presented. This bill is precisely what Massachusetts needs to reverse rising rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

Opponents of An Act relative to healthy youth argue that abstinence-only-until-marriage sexual education programs are more appropriate for high school students than comprehensive programs. However, such programs ignore the fact that 46% of high school students report being sexually active. Discussing contraception does not lead to earlier or increased sexual activity among teens; as a matter of fact, the teen birth rate in Massachusetts was the lowest it had ever been in 2010 [the last year for which data are available] as a direct result of “more and better and complete access to comprehensive sexual education and reproductive health services.” Some oppose the Act because they believe it is a parent’s duty to educate their children regarding sexual matters. However, Section I, Clause 5 of the bill gives parents the freedom to exempt their children from school-sponsored sexual education if they so desire.

Some worry that An Act relative to healthy youth would require schools to expend funds finding curricula that meet the criteria stipulated by the state. However, the bill does not require any spending on behalf of the state or schools. So as not to inconvenience already over-burdened and under-funded school districts, H.450 stipulates that the Department on Elementary and Secondary Education will upload a list of approved curricula to its website so that schools are not required to invest additional time or resources in finding appropriate sex education materials.

Furthermore, An Act relative to healthy youth is revenue-neutral; it requires no government spending and will in fact save the Commonwealth money in the long-term. As evidence from Maine, Colorado, and California illustrates, this bill’s implementation will result in less state money being spent on welfare for teen mothers, health care for teens infected with sexually transmitted infections, and Medicaid. State money saved by this bill can be fed back into the education system and continue to improve the opportunities available to Massachusetts youth — who will be able to appreciate these opportunities as healthy, happy members of society.

An Act relative to healthy youth will not only positively impact the health of our youth, but also the health of the Commonwealth as a whole. We ask that you all vote favorably on this bill, and empower schools, parents and teens to make healthy choices. Thank you.

Op-Ed
Let's Talk About Sex: Why Massachusetts Could Use More Teen Know-It-Alls

The Boston Globe recently released an article explaining that rates of chlamydia in certain Massachusetts districts — Dorchester and Lynn, in particular — have skyrocketed over the last decade. Nationwide, half of all sexually active people will have an STI by age 25. Too often, teens think they’re invincible from such troubling statistics. Many teens think they “know it all” — it’s the trademark complaint of every father, mother, and high school teacher. But of the 46% of high schools students in Massachusetts that are sexually active, many do not receive education that teaches them the harms and risks of unprotected sex. Teens might think they know everything there is to know about sex, but rising rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections among teens prove otherwise: teens don’t know it all.

But they should.

Luckily, your legislators in the State House are working hard to ensure that your teens have the opportunity to learn it all. An Act relative to healthy youth
[H.450/S.209] is a bill that requires all schools offering sexual education to make that education accurate and complete. It would teach budding teens everything they need to know upon entering our sexually charged world.

What’s not to love? An Act relative to healthy youth is a no-brainer. Accurate and complete sex education is the key to reducing rates of sexually transmitted infections and teen pregnancy. Countless studies have shown that sexually active teens that receive comprehensive sex education are more likely to use protection. In Massachusetts, the teen birth rate from 1989 to 2010 decreased more than 50% as a direct result of “more and better and complete access to comprehensive sex education and reproductive health services.”

Unlike the gun debate or Mayor Bloomberg’s infamous large soda ban, An Act relative to healthy youth is a simple, straightforward people-pleaser. It’s a common sense solution and it gives institutions, parents, and students choices.

The Act is not a mandate. It does not require all public schools to offer sexual education – although, if you ask me, that’s not a bad idea. Rather, it states that schools already offering sex education must make their curricula accurate and complete. School districts that embrace this responsible choice won’t have to waste time or money figuring out what’s comprehensive; the Commissioner of Education will develop a list of approved curricula, updated annually and available for free on the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website.

Furthermore, the Act upholds the current provision of state law allowing parents to exempt their children from sex education. Schools will make the option available, but ultimately the final choice rests with parents.

Finally – and this is key – An Act relative to healthy youth is a money-saver. It doesn’t cost the state or school districts a dime. As a matter of fact, the Act will save the Commonwealth millions of dollars in the long run, because less state money will be spent on welfare and Medicaid services for pregnant teens or teens with STIs. In 2006 alone, the total public cost for births resulting from unintended pregnancies was $182 million. Imagine what the state could do with $182 million. Fund public transportation? Improve the education system? The possibilities are endless. Implementing comprehensive sex education is a smart decision, for the health of our youth and our wallets.

The Joint Committee on Education will hold a hearing for the Act on May 14. If it goes well, the bill will have the chance to be voted upon on the House floor – and you can get involved. How?

1. Call your Representatives. Ask them to urge their colleagues in the Joint Committee to vote the bill favorably out of committee. (Not sure who your Reps are? Visit www.malegislature.gov to find out!)

2. Contact Michael Falcone, Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts Government Relations Manager, at mfalcone@ppalm.org. He can help you submit written testimony for the hearing, or come to testify in person at the State House.

Teen know-it-alls are annoying, I know. But the fact remains that teens are going to act like they know it all, whether they really know it all or not. If we can’t change them – and trust me, we can’t – let’s at least give them the information they need to make safe, healthy choices.

Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Hailey

On our March 5 visit the State House, Roberta, Emily and I scheduled a meeting with Representative John Rogers (D-Norwood), the House Majority Leader, a Joint Education Committee member, and a Brandeis alumnus. We planned on informing Representative Rogers about An Act relative to healthy youth, ultimately lobbying the bill and encouraging him to vote it positively out of committee. Due to Representative Rogers’ prominent stature in the House and his busy schedule, it is likely that our being Brandeis students helped us to secure a sit-down, thirty minute meeting with the Representative.

During the meeting, my teammates and I gave a general overview of the bill and presented Rep. Rogers with our storybooks and Coalition for Choice fact sheets. We explained many of the bill’s major selling points: that it is not a mandate, it is revenue-neutral and will in fact save the state money in the long run, and that parents may choose to opt their children out of sexual education classes if they so desire. We used Michael’s advice and framed the issue as a solely health-related one. Rep. Rogers seemed particularly surprised by the amount of money the state could save on retroactive health services for teen mothers by instead implementing preventative sexual education. Overall, he seemed very much in support of the bill and encouraged us to speak with the more conservative members of the Committee during our next State House visit.

Emily

Our first meeting was with Robert Oftring, legislative aide to Rep. Jim O’Day. An intern, Noelle, who was a senior at a nearby college, accompanied him. They were
both incredibly knowledgeable about our bill, H450 An Act relative to healthy youth, and helpful by providing us with suggestions for our next objectives. As Representative Jim O’Day is a co-sponsor for this bill along with Senator Katherine Clark, the aid and the intern were excited for our involvement, as we provided the student perspective. We were students advocating for this bill, which was a rarity in their lobbying efforts. Of course they had the help from major coalitions such as Planned Parenthood and NARAL, but the student perspective is invaluable to this campaign. Then to our surprise, Representative Jim O’Day greeted us!

Roberta

Representative Viera’s aide was very welcoming and she paid close attention to the information we were giving her. Initially, we gave Viera’s aide a fact sheet for the bill in addition to a recent article we had found in the news and she read the fact sheet pretty closely and even asked a few questions. We clarified for her that this bill is not a mandate – the districts have the option whether or not to include a sex-ed program, but if they do they must have a comprehensive program. When we were speaking with her about the bill and the issues that it aims to fix she seemed to agree with us that kids need to be given the appropriate information in order to make informed decisions. At one point in the meeting, she mentioned that she had young daughters and she told us that she wanted her daughters to receive medically accurate and age-appropriate information so that they do not find themselves in any bad situations. We also mentioned our line-item for Teenage Pregnancy Prevention and she was also supportive of this. It was especially helpful to find out that Viera’s aide had daughters because parents of young teenage daughters are concerned about their daughters knowing about their sexual health. The teenage years for a parent can be nerve-wracking because they want the best for their child and in order for their child to have the best they must be properly educated about their sexual health.

Update

On May 14, 2013, H.450 had a hearing in the Joint Committee on Education.

For more information

Massachusetts Coalition for Choice
http://www.prochoicemass.org/about-us/coalition-building.shtml

NARAL Pro-Choice Massachusetts
http://www.prochoicemass.org

Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts
http://www.plannedparenthood.org/ma