

Speech

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**Speech at the 1st Meeting of  
Ministers of Education and Health to prevent HIV  
in Latin America and the Caribbean**

**Mexico City, 1 August 2008**

**Speech by  
Dr Peter Piot,  
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Secretaria de Educación Josefina Vásquez Mota

Secretario de Salud José Ángel Córdova Villalobos

Embajador Juan Manuel Gomez Robledo

And my good friend and colleague Thoraya Obaid,

Excellencies, ladies and gentleman,

It is an honour to be here at this landmark conference – the first of its kind in this region to bring together health and education ministers to create a strategic alliance against AIDS.

Congratulations to the Government of Mexico - to the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Health, and Education - for having the vision to organize it.

I'd like to thank all the ministers for participating in this important meeting and for agreeing on a key declaration at the eve of the first International AIDS Conference in Latin America.

This meeting takes place as we enter a new phase in the AIDS response – a point at which we are at last beginning to see returns on our investments. For the first time, fewer people worldwide are dying of AIDS and fewer people are becoming infected with HIV.

Two years ago, in the Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS adopted at the United Nations High-Level Meeting on AIDS, governments committed to scale up towards *universal access* to comprehensive HIV prevention programs, treatment, care and support by 2010. They will only meet that commitment if they draw on all the resources they can muster – particularly, from both health and education.

Many countries represented here today are making impressive headway on AIDS, particularly in the areas of antiretroviral treatment. Many countries in the region including our host Mexico are now providing universal access to services to prevent mother to child transmission of HIV. By showing what is possible, you have inspired other regions.

But progress is less evident in Latin America and the Caribbean in other aspects of HIV prevention. Although gains have been made in some countries particularly in the Caribbean, infections continue to rise. Particularly among men who have sex with men, sex workers and injecting drug users.

One explanation for this is that these populations cannot easily access HIV both because their activities are typically illegal, and because social norms implicitly condone discrimination against them. So further congratulations to governments like Mexico's – that have changed their laws to better protect men who have sex with men.

Legislation is one thing. Enforcing legislation, and changing opinion is another. But it is much easier to get rid of prejudice if it doesn't have the chance to take hold in the first place. Because it plays such a key role in influencing what and how young people think, the school is the obvious place to build respect for people who seem "different" because they come from somewhere else, because they worship in a different church, or because they have different sexual preferences, or because they are living with HIV.

It is also the obvious place to start to eliminate gender inequalities – to break down social norms that relegate women and girls to a lower status than men and boys, increasing their vulnerability to HIV.

And the best place to transmit skills and form behaviours that will reduce young people's chances of becoming infected with HIV by including comprehensive education on sexuality and life skills in school curricula.

So it has been good to see the strong position taken by many health and education departments in Latin America on teaching about sexuality and family planning. I look forward to the day that similar programmes are in place throughout Central America and the Caribbean.

It will be critical for all these programmes to become more specific about HIV, and to include information that will help those boys who grow up to prefer same sex relationships to keep safe.

Every day, young people are becoming infected with HIV in Latin America and the Caribbean, because there is silence about sex, drugs and HIV in their homes, and in their schools. In many cases, government efforts to implement comprehensive sexuality education have met with resistance in the face of social, cultural and religious beliefs.

So it is important to work with those who shape beliefs – with families, religious groups, artists, actors, and the media – to create a more receptive environment. If they can be co-owners of the process, those messages will be heard and acted on.

There is evidence in just about every region of the world that families of young people are willing to accept the idea of sexuality education – once they see the advantages it brings.

The good news is that there is a wealth of reports showing the positive impact sexuality education programmes can have on encouraging safe sex - including waiting to start having sex until later.

This offers huge advantages for the health sector. Working with schools to design quality programmes offers a tremendous opportunity to reduce transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, bring down teenage pregnancy rates, and decrease the need for healthcare.

School students can also play a key role in taking over responsibility for reminding adults of HIV prevention messages.

One example of a programme involving civil society to good effect is a joint effort of the Ministries of Education and Health and civil society representatives of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay. This multi-country project develops public policies on education and sexuality and integrates sexual education guidelines in formal and informal national education processes – strengthening students’ ability to protect themselves and others from HIV.

Excellencies,

The Declaration “Prevention Through Education” you will sign this evening is a groundbreaking document. Its targets are ambitious.

As Executive Director of UNAIDS, I pledge the support of UNAIDS and its co-sponsors to help you achieve them.

We will continue to provide technical support – for example through the joint UNESCO-UNAIDS project which builds skills and knowledge relating to HIV within the education sector, and by brokering partnerships between government departments and other important actors, including civil society.

Health and education actors across the region have a chance now to really work together to compile and deliver messages.

We will, in short, do all we can to help your countries meet their universal access commitment.

We cannot falter in this commitment, and our best hope is to equip our youth with the right tools to end new infections. Only by educating the next generations can we pave the way for a future without AIDS.

On a personal note: I'm leaving at the end of the year and I would like to thank all of you for a constructive cooperation.

Thank you.