

NEWS

Worcester parents who opted kids out of sex ed explain their concerns



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WORCESTER — Patrick McDonald, a parent of several children in Worcester Public Schools, believes kids are being taught too much about sex way too early.

McDonald said the sex-education curriculum should remain scientifically and medically accurate, while also being age-appropriate.

"Looking at the curriculum, there are things in there that are completely inappropriate for the age groups," McDonald said. "Middle schoolers were being taught about oral sex and anal sex, which is insane."

Citing Worcester's high teen pregnancy and STD rates, city health officials urged schools to adopt a comprehensive sex education model, which the School Committee did in May with a 5-2 vote.

The School Committee elected to adopt the "Rights, Respect and Responsibility" curriculum, also known as the 3Rs curriculum this year. The program received an endorsement by the Worcester Board of Health in November.

Megara Bell, director of Partners in Sex Education, said her team worked with the administration, health education liaison and the director of curriculum to "develop a scope and sequence for all grades that fulfilled the national sets of standards and they fulfilled the specific task of the School Committee.

"Some of the criticism that we're getting from people who are not in favor of this particular curriculum, have to do with teaching anatomy," said Bell, whose Newton-based organization was contracted to support the district with rolling out the curriculum. "Apparently, they don't think that teaching anatomy is age-appropriate, so they often fixate on that, when in fact, we're not teaching that in Worcester."

Bell said the School Committee asked that the 3Rs curriculum be used for sex ed in middle and high school, and health education for elementary school.

Because of this, anatomy was not included for elementary school students until the fifth grade, at which point students begin to learn about reproductive organs.

"Fifth grade should seem incredibly uncontroversial to talk about how the bodies work," Bell said. "It's hard to talk about puberty without having some basic understanding of anatomy and I think that, that is a very age-appropriate time."

It's no secret that some parents — and groups — are opposed to the sex-education curriculum being taught to students in Worcester public schools, alleging it is pornographic or taking issue with the topics being covered.

As of February, 3,347 students out of the over 23,000 students in the district have been opted out of the program by their families, a number that has continued to grow since the beginning of the school year.

Sex ed begins in kindergarten

In Worcester, sex education starts in kindergarten and continues through high school. In kindergarten through third grade, students learn about gender roles and preventing bullying as well as sexual-abuse prevention.

In fourth through sixth grades, students continue expanding on the lessons they learned in elementary school and learn about sexual and reproductive anatomy, gender identities and different types of relationships.

In seventh and eighth grade, as well as high school, students learn about sexual orientation and gender identities, pregnancy and reproduction and sexual health including STD (sexually transmitted disease) and STI (sexually transmitted infection) prevention.

The comprehensive curriculum is taught at all grade levels in the district and guardians have the opportunity to opt their children out of the program as late as the day the sex ed class begins.

Why parents opted students out

Four parents of students in Worcester Public Schools shared their reasoning for opting their students out of the curriculum and what they would prefer the district do instead.

"It's not medical information. It's not biological information," McDonald said. "There was one with the high school students, they were teaching the kids how to play different sex games, and things you can do with your partner. ... That's not medically comprehensive."

When asked about whether students were being taught about anal and oral sex and how to perform them or sex games, Bell disputed the claim.

"Teaching people how to engage in sex would absolutely 100% not be appropriate in the schools at any age," Bell said. "We're using the phrase 'Sexual Health Education,' because I think it's a little bit clearer as to what the curriculum is actually about."

She said that it is not the school's place to teach kids about performing sex but rather about sexual health.

The first time that students learn about oral and anal sex in the curriculum is in sixth grade, when students first learn about rape and then later in eighth grade, when discussing sexual health, such as using condoms to prevent STDs and STIs.

Bell said that students will learn how to apply and dispose of a condom but that they would never be taught how to perform sexual acts.

"They need to know how pregnancy prevention works," Bell said. "They need to know how STD prevention works, reproduction, menstrual cycle, but there's so much more than that. That is a very small portion of what's in the curriculum."

Sexual health, not sexual acts

Bell also said that at no time would students learn about sex games or performing sex at any grade level in the curriculum.

The topic of sexual health, including the use of a condoms, contraceptives and pregnancy, would continue through high school, she said, but students never learn about performing sexual acts with partners.

"Sex looks different for different couples and for different relationships, and I feel like how somebody has sex is something that should be developed within the context of a loving, committed relationship not imposed by an external source," Bell said.

However, McDonald is not the only parent to have concerns about the appropriateness of the topics covered in the curriculum.

Latoya Lewis, who has a high school student in Worcester Public Schools and a grandchild also in the district, said she was also concerned with the appropriateness of the content being covered after looking over materials she received at an opt-out meeting.

"When I think of my 5-year-old coming home and sharing the experiences of things that he learned, 'I'm learning about my penis down there,' or ... my granddaughter talking about learning that her vagina can stretch big enough for something to fit in it, it just does not even seem normal for me," Lewis said.

She said the materials she received at the meeting discussed some of the topics the curriculum would cover including the elasticity of the vagina.

What's appropriate, what's not

Darshia Diaz Lugo, a parent of two children in Worcester schools, also shared similar concerns.

"Some of the content is how far the vagina elasticity is. I don't feel that should be discussed in school," Diaz said. "I don't see why it would be relevant teaching about the penis going in the anus. That's very pornographic."

While Lewis received her information from an opt-out meeting, Diaz said she came across the topic of vaginal stretching when looking through the curriculum on the 3Rs website as well as briefly on the Worcester Public Schools' website.

She said that the material was then taken off the website, reformed and put back up without the information about the elasticity of the vagina.

"No, that's false," Bell said when asked about this. "We did not reform anything. We didn't change anything. We laid out the entire scope and sequence over the summer."

She said that since the district does not cover childbirth, students asking questions may lead to a discussion about how babies can be delivered due to the elasticity of the vagina but otherwise that topic does not appear anywhere in the curriculum for any lesson in Worcester schools.

"There was all this misinformation going about all these things that were in it," Bell said. "Then when I did the presentation about everything, we tried to be incredibly clear everything that was in it. Then folks said that we were trying to conceal things."

Misinformation outside curriculum

She pointed to national organizations who stand in opposition to the 3Rs curriculum as contributing to the misinformation.

"They'll meet the health teacher. They'll talk about the curriculum. They'll get an idea of it and they'll be like, 'This sounds great, I want to have my kid in this,' and the schools will be like, 'You already opted out,' " Bell said. "The parents will be like, 'Oh, I opted out of that other thing I was hearing about but this I want,' and because the messages are so different, some parents don't even realize it's the same thing."

For Dezary Guzman, a parent of two kids in the district, the issue is not discussing anatomy but rather gender and sexual orientation.

"I think it's trendy now for children to try to identify or not identify as a gender or sexuality," Guzman said. "I don't think that this is something that is some kind of huge epidemic. It's seemingly that way now but I think we're pushing and forcing our children to think of things that aren't really the place of a child mentality-wise."

Discussing sex at home vs. classroom

She said she would rather deal with these conversations at home and wait for her children to approach her about their gender or sexual orientation.

"I would want to just make sure I looked deeper into it. It wasn't something that their friends were doing or that's trending on the internet," Guzman said. "I think when you start to get children to start to overthink that, when life is a little more complicated now than ever, then it starts to complicate things for children, especially children who don't have those thoughts to initially."

The topic of transgender and LGBTQIA+ identities was a point of contention for McDonald as well.

McDonald said that when young kids learn about transgender people in schools, it fails to also touch upon all facets of the conversation, presenting bias for one side.

"There's information in there that tells kids that sometimes they may feel like they were born in the wrong body, and it talks about transgender, with kids as young as 9 or 10," McDonald said. "There's no mention of what happens when, as in the majority of these cases, the kids in a few years grow out of it."

He said teaching these topics from one side's perspective goes against what parents are

"These are social issues that don't belong in that classroom for kids as young as they're teaching," McDonald said. "What I'm looking for is biology of reproduction, and sex and things like that — keep it strictly to things that are scientifically accurate and relatively uncontroversial."

Transgender, LGBTQIA+ identities

For Bell, the topic of transgender and LGBTQIA+ identities for kids is uncontroversial because, she said, some kids already identify with the community.

"We have a lot of LGBT kids in the school. Those kids already exist in the school, and the schools need to support all of the kids," she said. "Teaching acceptance of diversity of orientation and gender creates more safety for kids and reduces bullying."

While students learn about gender roles and gender stereotypes beginning in first grade, the term transgender does not first appear until fifth grade.

Likewise, students do not begin to learn about sexual orientation until the seventh grade.

Bell said that, in addition to affirming students' identities, it is difficult to discuss bullying without addressing the LGBTQIA+ community.

"To have people say that they want us to talk about bullying but they don't want us to talk about gender and orientation seems like a contradictory statement," Bell said. "In order to talk about bullying and to prevent bullying, we need to address some of the most common ways in which kids are bullied and that's on our agenda."

She also said that she is concerned about the mental toll it has on students when their identities are not affirmed.

"Not accepting kids' identities has done a devastating amount of damage over the decades and we have lost an unconscionable amount of young people to suicide because we refuse to accept the identities that they already have," Bell said. "So, no. I don't think it's going to be confusing. I think it's going to be a lot safer and better for the kids to support them where they are."

She said that it is not that more kids are experimenting or their identities are changing, it's "acknowledging the identities that are already there."

She has instead opted to teach her kids at home about these topics.

"I was a peer advocate as a youth myself, so I used to teach about HIV, sex education throughout the community," Diaz said.

She also discusses topics such as puberty and navigating their feelings and also draws from her experiences from past conversations with her adult children.

McDonald said that he and his wife also choose to teach their children at home rather than having them enroll in the program.

'Objectionable' material omitted

"We're actually using the curriculum at home to teach the kids we're removing all of the objectionable material and we're teaching the kids from the curriculum, heavily, heavily edited at home," McDonald said.

He said that when he and his wife, who is a scientist, don't know the answer to one of their kid's questions, they will consult other experts to assist them, such as a family friend who is a doctor.

The problem with at-home instruction versus classroom instruction, Bell said, is that kids will not always feel comfortable addressing important topics or questions with parents.

"The issue may be one of equity, that some students are a lot more likely to ask questions than others," Bell said. "If you're waiting for your young people to ask, you may not be getting all of them, and you may be getting it too late ... all of us tend to underestimate our children's maturity."

She said that it is important for students and parents to be having discussions at home about these topics and that school provides a neutral space for students to ask questions.

"A lot of kids just feel more comfortable asking some of those awkward questions in a relatively neutral environment, such as with a health teacher, who is going to be a trusted adult but one that may be more neutral," she said.

She also said that while she agrees that she would like teachers to receive more training, she is impressed with the work that they are doing this year.

"There are some stars. Some of the health teachers are just amazing," Bell said.

Health teachers added to budget

Bell said that when the district decided to implement the 3Rs curriculum, a budget was set aside to hire health teachers specifically to teach the curriculum.

The teachers, she said, are licensed health teachers and received their licensure through the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

"They need to have a bachelor's degree. They need to pass a MTEL (Massachusetts Test for Education Licensure) in health and family life science," Bell said. "And then specific to this curriculum, we had two full days of training in the summer right before the start of school and since then, we have had bimonthly PD."

She said that professional development sessions held every two months are an hour long and consist of working with her or with an outside expert contracted to come to speak with teachers.

"We did do a needs assessment for this to figure out what were the topics they needed the most support in," Bell said.

She said the sessions cover, "The different aspects of teaching that have been identified through the professional learning standards of sex education."

Bell declined to comment when asked whether she thought two days of training with the curriculum before the start of the school year was enough to prepare teachers.

Sex ed yes, 3Rs no

McDonald said that while he is not against comprehensive sex education, he is against the 3Rs curriculum specifically and plans to opt his children out of the curriculum each year unless the district changes the curriculum in its entirety.

"If they had been more open to listening to parents, instead of kind of brushing our concerns off, I think we probably could have come to some compromise," he said. "But the curriculum is not good. There's so much in there that is inappropriate."

Diaz and Guzman said they would also not consider enrolling their kids in the curriculum at any point while 3Rs is in place.

"It's unfortunate that you can't pick and choose what's being taught because we should feel safe what's being taught to our children," Guzman said. "One of the things that are no longer being taught in Worcester Public Schools is religion. If you can't teach your child religion in school, then you shouldn't be able to teach your child sexuality. There's a difference between sexual education and sexuality."