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Body

Roanoke County Public Schools students took the biennial Youth Risk Behavior Survey last month, but questions about sexual behaviors were removed from the middle school surveys after being deemed inappropriate for the first time since the surveys have been administered, according to school officials.

Most Virginia school systems administer the surveys to middle and high school students as a way to gauge risky behaviors students are engaging in, thus giving school system officials and partnering agencies the data needed to help combat trends deemed to be detrimental to the health and well-being of students.

The template for the surveys comes from the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, but the school system has a committee made up of employees and stakeholders from the area, which in part work to modify the exams as needed, with some questions routinely being deemed no longer necessary or a concern for students based on analyzing the data trends of past and current responses.

"Survey questions are focused on topics that could be indicative of behaviors and attitudes that put students at risk," according to the county school's website. "Topics include eating and health habits, safe driving, physical exercise, depression, bullying, self-injury, drug and alcohol, and social media use. The YRBS for grades 9-12 also includes questions about sexual behaviors."

Chuck Lionberger, the school system's spokesman, told The Roanoke Times in March the decision to remove the five questions related to sexual behavior from the seventh and eighth grade surveys was made by the survey committee.

"The survey committee determines the questions for the survey each time we do the YRBS [the survey] and some questions are added or removed based on relevance and/or age appropriateness," he wrote in a March 16 email.

The questions asked if a student had engaged in sexual intercourse, at what age, with how many partners, was a condom used and were drugs or alcohol involved. The questions were removed because the committee had determined they were no longer age appropriate questions.

Roanoke and Salem schools still have similar questions on their middle school and high school surveys, which are given out in odd years instead of even ones as is done at the county, according to officials from both cities' school systems.

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The state made it illegal to ask sixth graders questions on the survey related to sex in 2008.

However, Lionberger did not explain why the questions were deemed inappropriate in Roanoke County after having been on middle school surveys in some form for decades.

He also stated the school system would no longer be answering any further questions about why the questions were removed.

Additionally, executive director of the Roanoke County Prevention Council, and member of the committee that helps draft the surveys, Nancy Hans, said last month she was only told after the fact about the questions being removed from the exam.

The prevention council is a nonprofit formed in 2001, and is the school system's biggest partner with the survey. The council provides parents, students and educators with resources to combat problems related to wellness, according to its website.

Hans said she was told the questions were removed after some school board members raised concerns about sexual behavior being age appropriate for seventh and eighth graders.

"I don't know all of the reasons that happened," she said last month.

Hans didn't state whether she agreed or disagreed with the decision to remove the questions, but she did say it is important to have as much data as possible to know how to help students going forward.

"When we don't have the information, we don't know how to put the programs in place," she said, also noting former school boards in the county have generally not gotten as involved in the process as the current board.

Virginia Tech professor Kerry Redican and Radford University professor David Sallee, who both help with the data analysis of the surveys, and are also members of the survey committee. Both said last month they were unaware the questions had been removed, with Sallee stating the first he'd heard of it was when asked by The Roanoke Times.

The school system released a series of emails to The Roanoke Times as a result of a Virginia Freedom of Information Act request regarding the surveys, and an excerpt from a Feb. 2 email from Superintendent Ken Nicely to the school board states that he was the one that had the sexual behavior questions removed from the middle school surveys.

"At my direction, the RCPS version of the 7th and 8th grade YRBS eliminated all questions about sexual activity this year. Such questions are allowed by state law above grade 6, but we decided not to include them this year in grades 7-8 either," he wrote.

Nicely also mentioned to the board the Virginia Department of Health had questions about being transgender in its version of the survey, but the school system would not be asking those questions either.

The superintendent also reassured Brent Hudson, the Catawba District board member, at a March 1 work session there would be no questions about being transgender on any of the surveys.

The work session was held after the surveys were delayed from being administered in early February, so new Roanoke County School Board members Cheryl Facciani and Hudson could be brought up to speed about the surveys and the process of how they work, according to Lionberger.

A Feb. 4 email from Hudson to Nicely involves communication after Hudson received more complaints from parents about some of the questions, which were available to view on the school's website.

"I spoke with some of the other board members and Tim [Greenway], Cheryl, and I would like for you to pause the survey going out to the students and give us time to look at it and discuss it," he wrote. "I appreciate everything you

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have done thus far with it but I have gotten more complaints this morning about it and I believe we need to at minimum discuss it.

"Please send an email out advising parents that the survey is being put on hold until a later date. Also, Can you email the surveys to all the members because some did not receive them."

Some of Facciani's correspondence in emails with Nicely and board members include her statements on the general topic.

"As a parent, I did not allow my children to watch PG-13 movies, when they were 10-11 years old. To each his own when it comes to parenting, but I do believe, as a SB member it is my job to question if this is appropriate, especially when surrounding counties are not administering to middle school students. It sends a red flag," she wrote.

Franklin County is the only school system in the region not to administer the surveys to middle schoolers, according to an email from Nicely to Facciani.

In another email Facciani tells Nicely, "upon reviewing the final survey, if the sexual questions have been removed and barring any other serious issues, I will be ready to approve the survey for middle and high school."

A question referencing the use of ADHD medication from other students was also altered on the final surveys given to sixth grade students in late March.

Hudson brought up at the work session how a parent was concerned her child being asked the question would give them the idea to use the medication, despite Hans telling Hudson there is no data to support kids learning bad behavior or getting ideas from surveys. The question was later altered to remove the reference from the middle school exam.

Hans told The Roanoke Times, "kids already know what's going on, whether the parents know they know it or not. The data supports that."

In an email exchange between Facciani and Nicely, she also expressed concern about the question regarding Adderall and huffing substances for sixth graders.

"The only two questions I have concerns with are the huffing glue and Adderall questions for a 11 year old," she wrote. "I think it could be suggestive for a very small percentage of that young, impressionable population. I know when I was a kid and heard you could sniff magic markers, I thought twice about it.

"And I was a good kid who never touched anything. Still haven't. So, is it possible to pull those 2 questions for 6th grade? I don't know if that throws off the metrics. I am happy the sexual questions are gone."

Shawn Hughes, director of counseling at RCPS, told Nicely in an email that the data suggested the Adderall reference could be removed as it had a less than 2% rate of use by students who participated in the 2020 exam, but to keep the huffing question as it was just above 8%.

The huffing question was ultimately kept on the survey, while the reference to Adderall was removed.

For comparison, a 2020 presentation of the data to the school board showed 8% of middle school students had sent sexually inappropriate technology messages and the huffing question had a similar response.

Parents have the option of opting their children out of the survey if they were not comfortable with the questions being asked. Of the 7,000 secondary students eligible to take it, fewer than 200 students had opted out, according to a March 16 email from Lionberger.

The school system wrote in an email parents were not notified about the removal of the sexual questions because the school system did not add questions to the survey.

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Hudson declined to comment about the surveys, as did Facciani after a school board meeting in March, and all of the board members declined to respond to an email with questions about the surveys.

Graphic

Courtesy of Roanoke County Public Schools Courtesy of Roanoke County Public Schools Nicely Courtesy of Roanoke County Public Schools

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