

## Panelists discuss sex ed standards at League of Women Voters forum

- By BRETT FRIEDENSOHN Staff Writer Mar 21, 2023

HANOVER TWP. –



Lisa Culhane, a Montclair resident who is a member of the League of Women Voters of New Jersey's Women and Family Issues Committee, moderates a forum at the Morris County Library Monday, March 13. At left is panelist Tazmine Weisgerber, the training and technical assistance manager at the Answer sex ed organization at Rutgers University. Photo by Brett Friedensohn

Moderator Lisa Culhane, a Montclair resident who is a member of the League of Women Voters of New Jersey's Women and Family Issues Committee, said at the beginning of the forum that the league members will address questions at the end; it's league policy that people who want to ask questions submit them on index cards.

At several points during the forum, however, a few attendees called out to ask questions and made points in opposition of the state's sex ed standards. Culhane and other LWV members frequently asked them to stop and asked them to write questions on index cards. Some of the comments were in favor of an opt-in policy regarding sex ed, rather than an opt-out format that New Jersey currently uses.

One of the panelists, K-12 South Orange-Maplewood School District Director of Access and Equity Kerri Waibel, said opt-in is complicated because it sometimes doesn't allow kids to get information for a few reasons, one being that parents might not see the paperwork.

Waibel also spoke about how this applies to kids in the LGBTQ community, specifically with regards to the middle school career of her son Louis Waibel, a Kinnelon High School senior who was one of the panelists.

"We didn't know Louie was gay," Waibel said. "If I was a parent who had to opt in, I might not know that he needs that information that maybe I'm not able to give him or don't even know to give it to him. And I think it really supports that particular community especially ... kids that might have sexual intercourse that parents don't know about."

Panelist Tazmine Weisgerber, the training and technical assistance manager at the Answer sex ed organization at Rutgers University, spoke about her work providing training to educators about the state's new health standards rolled out in 2020.

She said she's been providing education for communities, and this includes nightly workshops that cover what the standards are, how they might look in a classroom and what the rationale is for including the standards at each age group. She's also provided education sessions so parents can learn the skills and knowledge so they can work with their children, she said.

"This works best when everyone has these conversations with young people. They should be happening at home," Weisgerber said. "Unfortunately, we know that they don't always happen. And so that's why school really needs to be there to help those young people who aren't getting those conversations at home. Some things that folks should know are, as was mentioned, the majority of folks want sex ed in schools."

When someone in the audience called out and asked for a specific study that finds this, Weisgerber referred to "[Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education](#)," a 2020 article in the Journal of Adolescent Health.

The article was co-authored by Dr. Lisa Lieberman, chair of public health at Montclair State University, and Dr. Eva Goldfarb, a professor of public health at Montclair State.

"There's a few different reasons why we're not seeing as much support for sex ed as there are people who are in support, and that's because some people have no idea that there are even issues," Weisberger said.

"Most folks think of New Jersey as a leader in sex education. We were one of the first states to pass mandated sex education in New Jersey public schools. So many folks don't even think that that's even an issue that they need to worry about. And so we need to make sure that folks are aware of this and know what they can do to help if it's happening in their communities."

Weisberger also talked about how the standards are set up by grade band, and there's certain standards that have to be covered in kindergarten through second grade, third through fifth grade, sixth through eighth grade and ninth through 12th grade.

One of the standards is that by second grade, students are supposed to know the names of all their body parts including their genitals, Weisberger said.

“Not only is it recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics that all people know these terms before they can even speak,” Weisberger said.

“So when you’re teaching them eyes and ears and fingers and toes, you should also be teaching them penis and nipples and other parts of their bodies because they are simply body parts. But by the time they get into school, the reason this is so important is because there is research that shows that folks who are groomers who want to sexually abuse young people, they purposely find young people who are the most naive about their bodies and about what grooming and abuse is because they know that it’s going to be easier to groom and abuse that child and get away with it.”

Chatham Borough resident Sandra Roos said after the panel that she thought the panel was one-sided and that with regards to introducing curricula at younger ages, when it’s normalized to have these discussions with younger children, the panelists didn’t address the children speaking with adults.

“They’re talking about how it’s trusted adults,” Roos said. “Sometimes, those trusted adults are the ones that are harming the children, and they don’t address that at all. So you have a child who’s ten or nine or eight, and they’re speaking to adults who they trust about sexuality, it becomes a problem.”

Among the panelists was Jill Weber, Board of Education president for the K-12 School District of the Chathams, who said board members’ jobs are to hopefully provide context.

“I think, basically, problems come out when there’s a lack of context, context on my part, context on the part of the parent, context on the part of the administration,” Weber said.

“And once we can have those dialogues in public and clear up some of the misconceptions in the context and we have a shared objective, I think we can move a lot faster growing in the same direction once we have those shared dialogues.”

In Chatham specifically, very little has changed according to Weber, who said standards set the expectations, and curriculum is about implementation, which is where local school districts get involved.

The administration in the Chathams put the lessons together with commendations from parents. Two or three weeks before the lessons started, the administration would send the entire lesson to the parents whose children will receive the lesson, and this includes a video, Weber said.

Of about 3,800 students in the district, about nine parents have opted out, and out of those nine, two or three opted back in after seeing the video, Weber said.

“So it kind of dispelled some of the myth about what was going on out there, and we showed them exactly what the lesson was going to be, so there was no more context that was lost,” Weber said. “And if they had questions, they could call the school.”

Chatham Borough resident Libby Hilsenrath said after the forum that the forum would have been better-served if it had more of a question and answer format. She also said that the state's standards are excessive and that it's "uncalled for" for kids to learn about genitalia in fourth grade.

"I think it's a parent's role to teach their kids about safe sex or whatever it is, not the schools," Hilsenrath said. "And it's also not the job of the schools to be in charge of the children's mental health. That's the job of the parents."