

April 18, 2022

Dear Midland Park Parents/Guardians,

The June 2020 adoption of new sex education standards in New Jersey is a complex and controversial issue. We wanted to provide our district community with information on this important topic in an effort to answer questions and allay some concerns.

Historical Background of the Legislation

In June 2020, New Jersey adopted new sex education standards to expand what students are taught about relationships, pregnancy and consent, and to include updates on abortion and gender identity. At that time, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy stated, “The standards were crafted over five months in collaboration with parents, experts, and teachers to ensure that our students receive age-appropriate and inclusive health education, which is critical for their physical, mental, and emotional development and well-being.” Some critics and New Jersey State Board of Education members objected to the new standards, saying they violate the rights of parents/guardians to teach their children about sensitive subjects. One example used in objections concerns language changes in the new standards: previous standards mentioned the legal rights of abortion and the new standards cite abortion as an option for pregnancy. (no.jersey.com)

Murphy Orders Review of New Standards

It is important to note that on April 13, 2022, Governor Murphy ordered the state Department of Education (NJDOE) to review the new standards adopted in 2020 to, “...provide further clarification on what age-appropriate guidelines look like for our students.”

NJ Comprehensive Health and Physical Education Standards

The New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLS) for Comprehensive Health and Physical Education includes content in Social and Sexual Health. Included in this section are Core Ideas and Performance Expectations. Here is just one example from the state document:

Core Idea—what students must know: Every individual has unique skills and qualities, which can include the activities they enjoy such as how they may dress, their mannerisms, things they like to do.

Performance Expectations—what students should be able to do: Discuss how individuals make their own choices about how to express themselves; discuss the range of ways people express their gender and how gender-role stereotypes may limit behavior.

The NJSLS Comprehensive Health and Physical Education Guide may be reviewed by accessing this link: <https://www.nj.gov/education/cccs/2020/2020%20NJSLS-CHPE.pdf>

What does this mean for districts and families?

The process of reviewing and revising curriculum remains ongoing at this time. Our district is proceeding in accord with identified timelines for a mandated September 2022 implementation and moving forward with caution, as we know the additional review of the new standards just announced by the Governor may change the guidelines. Please know Parents/Guardians will have immediate access to the revised district curriculum, as all curriculum is posted on the district website once completed and approved.

Can Parents/Guardians “Opt Out” of this instruction?

Parents/Guardians have the option of excluding their child from any portion of sexuality/family life education instruction if it is in conflict with their conscience, morally, or religiously held beliefs. State Statute Section: 18A:35-4.7 reads: *Parent's statement of conflict with conscience: Any child whose parent or guardian presents to the school principal a signed statement that any part of the instructions in health, family life education or sex education is in conflict with his conscience, or sincerely held moral or religious beliefs shall be excused from that portion of the course where such instruction is being given and no penalties as to credit or graduation shall result therefrom.* However, Parents/Guardians may not opt out of instruction with regard to LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning) references in other content areas, such as social studies.

Have sample lesson plans been shared by other districts?

It is our understanding a New Jersey public school district recently shared sample lesson plans about this issue. It appears the dissemination of these plans has caused confusion as the sample materials were not state-mandated, had not been adopted, and were shared to “illustrate types of resources.” Three days ago, Governor Murphy spoke to this matter, saying the state has, “Seen a handful of sample lesson plans being circulated that have not been adopted in our school districts and do not accurately reflect the spirit of the standards.”

What are “Next Steps?”

As with all legal mandates, our district is committed to remaining in compliance with NJSLS competencies. Nonetheless, we are also acutely aware of our responsibility to listen to the concerns of our families and respond with as much information as possible. We can assure you that our teachers are well equipped to provide instruction that is age-appropriate, no matter the content area. Further, the instructional method by which information is nuanced is at the discretion of the teacher, who prudently chooses content that is appropriate for the students’ age level.

Our principals, teachers, and all in our district hope you will continue to reach out to us with questions and concerns—we are simply one phone call or email away. Be assured we will seek to keep you informed of further developments in weeks to come.

Best regards,

Marie C. Cirasella, Ed. D.

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