

A Utah school district dropped its emotional health program after parents found it linked to a website about sex

The move has caused a divide, though, with other parents saying the lessons were beneficial in teaching kids about empathy and resilience.

Stacie Clayton and Lisa Logan from Utah Parents United shared their concerns in a video about the social-emotional learning program in Canyons School District on Sept. 30, 2021.

By Courtney Tanner

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Conservative parents have pushed a Utah school district to suspend its efforts to teach kids about emotional health after a mom discovered that one of the lessons linked to a website on dating and sex.

A spokesman for Canyons School District said that administrators weren't aware of the link within the social-emotional learning program, known as Second Step, which is supposed to help students understand empathy and respect.

It's not clear, said Jeff Haney, how the link got there: whether administrators missed it in their review and it's been in the curriculum since the district approved the program four years ago — or if the third-party company that created the program added it in recently. Either way, he acknowledged, the link violates state law on sex education.

And with pressure from the vocal group of parents worried about what else might be in lessons, the district has decided to drop the entire Second Step program until it can find and vet an alternative.

That will temporarily leave students without instruction on how to understand and manage emotions, build positive relationships and make responsible decisions, which mental health experts say is especially beneficial with the ongoing pandemic.

“I just can't defend some of the links and some of the agenda that I see with Second Step,” noted Canyons Superintendent Rick Robins, addressing the concerns during a school board meeting last week that was first covered by KUTV.

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In Utah, schools are permitted to teach only an “abstinence-based” sex education program, which promotes celibacy as the most effective way to prevent pregnancy. Teachers cannot discuss “premarital or extramarital sexual activity.” And parents must opt their children in to any lessons on the topic.

The Canyons' program, though, directed students to loveisrespect.org — without any notice. The site has articles titled “Feeling safe during sex” and “Five tips for your first time.” It also provides resources for healthy relationships, warning signs of abuse, LGBTQ partnerships, consent and boundaries.

Stacie Clayton, the parent who found the link after reviewing the curriculum for her kid's eighth-grade class, said in a video for Utah

Parents United that she believes those topics “are totally inappropriate for a middle-school-age child.”

She and others with the conservative parent group — which has lately fought against masking in schools — then campaigned against the district during several board meetings, saying the program had been co-opted. They have since suggested that the lessons also include other “damaging ideologies,” “a political agenda” and even “tenets of critical race theory.”

Social-emotional learning “is the new name for CRT,” one mom told the Canyons school board during the public comment period last week. “Manure by any other name stinks just as bad.”

Lisa Logan, also with Utah Parents United, added in a post: “It goes way past saying be kind and inclusive of people who are different from you. They really want children to accept these ideologies and advocate for them through social justice advocacy.”

The group has promised to look at other districts’ programs next.

Logan said in a video: “We want to figure out where the indoctrination is coming to our kids and particularly where it’s usurping family values and beliefs.”

Parents in support

After a year defined by a culture war in the classroom with masks and flags and lessons about race, emotional health now appears to be another battlefield.

During the Canyons school board meeting last week, the public comment period became heated as half of the speakers argued over their concerns with the social-emotional learning program and the other half defended it. The back-and-forth went on for more than an hour.

Some teachers, counselors and parents said Second Step has given children the language to express their feelings, resulting in fewer outbursts in the classroom.

Jennifer Rupp, a social worker for the district, said one elementary school in Canyons saw an 80% decline in discipline referrals to the front office after one year of teaching Second Step.

She pleaded with the school board not to disband the elementary program, noting that the concerns brought forward by Utah Parents United were focused instead on the middle school lessons. The district's youngest students, she said, really need the discussions about emotions, especially with the challenges and stresses with COVID-19 — with 30% of Utah students saying in a recent survey that the pandemic has increased their anxiety.

Alison Teller, a counselor at a Canyons elementary school, started crying at the podium. She said: "It's been transforming our schools in only the best ways."

She encouraged the board to use the same skills that she teaches kids in the program to address their issues with Second Step: state the problem, think about the solutions, explore the consequences and pick the best option.

The district has spent more than \$300,000 on the program, she said, and the best option is to not just throw it away.

A few parents asked Canyons to remove the links to the loveisrespect.org site and continue using the program. They said they've seen — and research on the program backs up — a boost in their kids' grades and improved attitudes since they've been learning about social-emotional health.

One mom said her daughter has benefited from getting to take 10 minutes to calm herself when she's upset. Others mentioned that their kids feel heard when they get the time to talk about how they're feeling

in class, whether it's sharing stress over a test or excitement over something like a new sibling. They've learned breathing exercises and goal setting and about not bullying.

“At a time when students are struggling more than ever with mental health and teachers are hanging by a thread, it is harmful to us to take these resources from us,” said Rebecca Jimas.

Jimas is a fourth grade teacher in the district and also has four kids enrolled there. She has been teaching Second Step for three years.

“I do not feel that Second Step in the fourth grade level has any political or underlying meanings,” she said.

‘Flexible and adaptable’

The division over the program first started when a teacher at Draper Park Middle School in the district shared his resignation letter on social media. Sam Crowley, who taught seventh grade choir, said he was leaving because he was being forced to teach things with Second Step that he didn't feel were appropriate.

“The more I watched and read, the more uncomfortable I became,” he wrote.

His letter has since been shared thousands of times and become a rallying cry for conservative parent groups in Utah, including Utah Parents United, Utahns Against Common Core and the Utah Eagle Forum, as well as those in other states.

Crowley specifically mentioned parts of the curriculum that bothered him. He said it teaches that parents can be “roadblocks” to their kids. And he said some of the videos include “propaganda” from Black Lives Matter, featuring footage of protests from the groups.

He also noted that the program mentioned “House of the Dragons,” a prequel to “Game of Thrones.” Crowley wrote: “‘Game of Thrones’ is

reprehensible media containing pornography, overt and explicit violence, and all manner of debauchery. ... It has no place in our schools.”

He said district administrators were kind but told him that his “concerns were unfounded.” They said they would continue on with the program because of its benefits.

Crowley’s letter, said Logan with Utah Parents United, prompted her and Clayton to start looking at the curriculum. They went into the district office and spent 30 hours, she said, reviewing the lessons for eighth graders. There, they found the link about sex that has become the focus of the concerns.

(Screenshot) Pictured is the homepage of the loveisrespect.org website that parents are concerned is linked to in Canyons School District curriculum for social-emotional learning.

Logan added that they also discovered “a political agenda that was woven throughout the entire program,” she said, “including tenets of critical race theory, like power and privilege.”

Critical race theory is a college-level academic framework that pinpoints racism as the defining feature of the United States, shaping the country’s founding and current legal system. Those on the political right have recently latched onto it as a threat to the nation’s children, arguing that it inappropriately inserts race into classroom instruction that should be colorblind.

The state Legislature has moved to ban it, but there’s no evidence it’s being taught anywhere in Utah’s K-12 schools. Nancy Tingey, board president for Canyons School District, noted before the public comment period began: “Critical race theory is not part of the curriculum.”

Still, other parents joined those dissenting, saying “teachers aren’t therapists” and “this curriculum tries to drive a wedge between me and my child.” They called for a neutral program.

The nonprofit that created Second Step, though, which is has received grants from the U.S. Department of Education, says it is neutral. The program is peer-reviewed, researched and often cited by academics.

A spokesperson for the Committee for Children in Seattle, said, “Our programs do not have the foundational underpinnings associated with critical race theory. As an organization, we are only focused on fostering the safety and well-being of every child.”

She noted that districts that use the lessons across the nation have control with the “flexible and adaptable” curriculum.

“We really try to work with districts to understand their needs and provide them with resources that will work best for them,” she said. “It’s really up to them.”

What’s next

Second Step is also used by the Murray, Jordan and Salt Lake City school districts. None of them report having the same problematic link in their programs.

But Canyons Superintendent Robins said he didn’t want to keep the curriculum in the district because he worried it would be “like playing whack-a-mole” to eliminate issues. He worries about what else might come up that the district wasn’t aware of.

The board members supported him.

“My dad taught me when in doubt, just don’t,” said Clareen Arnold. “He also taught me if there’s one little piece in a movie, just turn it off.”

For now, while they cannot use Second Step lessons, Arnold suggested that teachers help students with their emotions by reading books about character or listening to music or exercising in gym class. They can also send kids to district counselors, when needed.

The board declined to approve another social-emotional learning program to replace Second Step, saying they needed time to look through any other curriculum thoroughly.

“I felt bad I hadn’t done more homework before,” Arnold said.

They called on the state Legislature and the Utah Board of Education, as well, to provide direction on social-emotional learning. The state board does not require districts or charters to include that curriculum. But a spokesperson there said “due to the high interest and an increase in requests for technical assistance” from schools, they’re now looking at ways they can provide support.

Robins said he’s a big supporter of teaching kids about their emotional health.

“My position is not an indictment on the need for supporting our students with social emotional learning,” he said. “Our students show up with great baggage each day.”

But he said he’d feel more comfortable if the district developed its own curriculum moving forward. The Canyons board will talk about that possibility at its next meeting on Tuesday.

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