

CHANGES TO UTAH'S SEX-ED IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS AREN'T ENOUGH FOR PARENTS

Parents say Utah's new sex-ed curriculum is still missing what was most clearly absent before the changes

By: Megan Nielsen

LOGAN, Utah -- It was the first day of supplemental sex education, Piper Christian recalled. She didn't really want to be there. Her older siblings told her to be prepared for a series of uncomfortable conversations. She was only there because her mom forced her into it. "I was an awkward teenager," she said. "I didn't want to talk about sex."

The mentor was saying things like "penis," "vagina," "there's a wide range of normal" and "this is a safe space." Christian said it started as a "weird and uncomfortable experience."

But, Christian now believes it was important. After all, she wasn't going to learn those things in school.

In May, the Utah Legislature passed an amendment to Utah's sex education code requiring instruction in "refusal skills" and "the harmful effects of pornography." But in the first semester in which this revised program is being implemented, some parents are concerned that the curriculum is still vastly incomplete — and they're enrolling their children in supplemental sex education programs.

The "refusal skills" are intended to provide students with instruction on the legal age of consent, and help students emphatically stop unwanted sexual advances and harassment.

That's all fine, said Dawn Hansen, a parent of a recent Logan High School graduate. But the curriculum is still missing the stuff that was most conspicuously absent before the changes.

The new curriculum, Hansen said, is "not going to keep young people from getting pregnant."

Utah's law states instruction must stress abstinence before marriage and fidelity after marriage. The law prohibits instruction in the intricacies of intercourse and sexual stimulation, the advocacy of premarital sexual activity and advocacy of contraceptive methods or devices.

Both school -- and for many kids, church -- teach abstinence only. "I understand those beliefs but, at the same time, if your kid is out there experimenting and doesn't know what to do, they should know the possibilities for birth control and understand that there are different sexualities and identities," said Sarah Ringueberg, a parent of Logan High School students.

Hansen and Ringueberg both felt sex education at the public schools wasn't enough and enrolled their teenagers in a sex education program called Our Whole Lives at Logan's Unitarian church.

Unlike the sex-ed program at public schools, "It's not an abstinence-based program," OWL coordinator Lorien Belton said. "We tell them what sex is, we tell them how to be safe, we answer their questions... Honesty is a very important part of this curriculum."

"You can't even make a comparison it was so different," Christian said of the OWL program and public school sex education.

"There were a lot of teen pregnancies at our school and I think if they had taught us more safety it could have prevented some of those types of situations," said Hannah Johns, a 2017 Logan High School graduate.

It's great to know and teach refusal skills but "if you really feel so inclined to have sex... it's really important to know to be protected to make sure you don't change your life really quickly," Hansen said.

"I just wish we'd gotten to put a condom on a banana is all," laughed Christian Morril, a Logan High School graduate.

Logan High School health teacher Stacey Flygare said she hopes topics of sex and safety are being discussed in the home between parents and their children. "That's the first place it should be discovered and discussed," she said.

If not, the school's curriculum won't help.

Hansen said the public school curriculum doesn't create an open environment for questions at school or at home. The OWL program "created a dialogue," Hansen said. "It opened up that door for communication."

Flygare acknowledged she believes students are learning it online and from each other instead of their parents or the school. "I hope as educators we do a good job teaching them how to get factual information," she said.

"It's not fair to fail to give people full information about their own bodies," Belton said. "One of the OWL program values is that it's ethically important to give people full information about their bodies, to not let what any teacher thinks personally cloud the information we give them."

Christian said she came out of OWL not only thinking it was critical to her development to learn that information but also having made some of her closest friends. "It was kind of like trauma bonding," she laughed.