

Second Student Survey Debated

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WALLINGFORD — While the Board of Education supports conducting another health survey of high school students, some members want to make sure the entire community gets involved to address the results before pursuing a second round of questions.

The first survey took place in 2013. About 1,700 students from Sheehan and Lyman Hall high schools filled out the 99-question survey. The questions covered school environment; family environment; the community; peer-group of children; students' their own perception of themselves and what they are dealing with, according to Youth and Social Services Director Craig Turner.

The results revealed the differences in student behavior by grade level. The Coalition for a Better Wallingford recently requested permission from the school board to conduct a second round.

"We'd like a second survey done for a number of reasons — to see if there are changes," said Ken Welch, one of the founders of the coalition. "We've had 37 events and distributed information."

The school board discussed the survey at the end of its meeting Monday, but because it was not on the agenda, no action could be taken. During discussions, members offered differing views on whether the survey should be conducted immediately or should wait until questions from school board members were answered.

Jean-Pierre Bolat, a Republican school board member, said Tuesday he wants to administer a second survey. He would like to see the survey administered each year for data collection.

"One survey is not enough because anybody that is a student of data and statistics knows that one data point does not provide the full picture," Bolat said. "... I want to see trends. I'm a scientific guy and I see the value in collecting as much data as you can."

Democratic school board member Jay Cei felt there were "alarming findings" in the first survey, noting that 20 percent of students said they seriously considered or actually attempted suicide during the past year.

"If this is true, I believe it is the biggest issue in Wallingford and requires a community-wide effort," Cei said. "This effort needs to be unified to be effective and needs to be headed up by a social services professional."

Cei said he supports administering a second survey quickly.

School board Vice Chairman Joe Marrone, however, questioned if enough time has passed since the last survey.

"It hasn't changed enough to do a second baseline of data," Marrone said. "I don't think it changed enough or we've given it enough time to see if enough has changed."

In his comments to the school board Monday, Welch said the coalition worked with school guidance counselors, created a presentation aimed at 10th-grade students, partnered with the Parent Teacher Advisory Council to address underage drinking, and began organizing "Bring Back the Neighborhood" meetings to "strengthen the support systems for the family unit."

Marrone acknowledged the school system implemented different things as a result of the survey, such as the hiring of a wellness curriculum coordinator, but there were issues that needed to be answered by other departments in the community.

At a meeting earlier this year, the school board talked about another survey. Bolat said the item on the agenda was whether to allow the coalition to conduct the survey and collect data.

“That’s a simple question,” he said. “(School Superintendent) Dr. (Salvatore) Menzo and everyone else reiterated that no one opposes it, so why can’t it be done?”

Other school board members, however, want to see a procedure established before another survey is administered.

Democratic school board member Michael Votto said the board can’t approve the survey and hand it out to the students the next day.

“When a teacher does a lesson, there is a goal and objective. You have to have a plan of action and some way to evaluate it,” Votto said. “To just say, ‘Send out a survey’ is not enough. You need to know what you are going to do with the survey; what do you plan on doing with that survey; and what people will be a part of using that survey.”

Administering the survey before knowing the answers, Votto said, “is putting the cart before the horse.”

School board Chairwoman Roxane McKay, a Republican, wants the town to recognize that it is a community issue.

“Certainly the Board of Education could be a spoke in the wheel, but we’re not the wheel,” McKay said. “... The coalition has a very deep interest in supporting it, but also from the town side, I’m looking for the support of other departments that are willing to support the process.”

Democratic school board member Kathy Castelli also raised the question of who would be responsible for organizing the survey, administering it and analyzing the data.

“We don’t have the resources of taking the results of that survey and acting upon the results — meaning creating programs and the opportunity to reach out to these kids to give them the tools they need to handle whatever the results the survey indicates,” she said Tuesday.

She agreed with a point Menzo made during the meeting that the town has to decide it’s willing to work with the coalition, school board and other departments to act upon the results.

Menzo elaborated on his position Tuesday.

“We want to make certain there is a systemic approach to addressing the results of the survey,” Menzo said. “... The idea is that this is a community issue or a community concern.”

When the school board discussed the health survey before it was administered in 2013, members were told the data was needed to qualify for a grant worth \$125,000 per year for up to five years. The grant is awarded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The school board recently questioned Turner on why the grant wasn’t applied for and how it would be used if the town received the money.

Turner said Tuesday that the questions were incorrectly directed to him. He answered the questions, however, saying the grant has to be applied for by a nonprofit organization, adding that the money would be used to create a strategic plan and implementing that plan over the five-year period.

The Coalition for a Better Wallingford did not apply for the grant because it was awaiting its approval as a tax-exempt organization, Welch said. In addition, the coalition was working to bolster partnerships and relationships with other organizations in town, such as the police department.

He emphasized that the coalition will apply for the grant, which opens in December and is due by March. He was unsure why there was a delay in receiving approval to do a second round of the survey.

“All this talk of a strategic plan and coordination of data seems to be a way to avoid doing the survey because it might generate negative information that people don’t have the money or time to deal with the results,” Welch said.

Members of the Board of Education feel otherwise.

“A survey will happen,” Marrone said, “but we need to know why now and where is it going from there?”

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