

4/27/22

Youth survey changes would hamper progress in NH

Back in the Dark Ages, nobody talked much about mental health. People were afraid to discuss how they felt. Questions about mental illness weren't asked. The Youth Risk Behavioral Health Survey (YRBS), a national survey administered in New Hampshire by the Department of Health and Human Services, didn't exist. Now, thanks to a bill that's on its way to the New Hampshire Senate Finance Committee (HB 1639), the YRBS might become a relic that pushes us back into the Dark Ages. It harkens back to that old saying, "Don't give an answer, frame the question." The YRBS does just that, and very effectively. It asks students to answer questions about behaviors such as carrying weapons at school, being forced to engage in sexual activity, bullying, depression, suicidal behavior, body weight, eating habits, and alcohol, tobacco and drug use. And it frequently prompts conversations with teachers that gets help to students in need.

Now, New Hampshire legislators want to turn the YRBS from an opt-out survey to an opt-in one. That means parents will have control over whether, and maybe even how, their children respond. If children don't take the survey, valuable data that drives much federal funding for health and mental health in New Hampshire will be jeopardized. This is a national survey, administered every other year. New Hampshire should keep its fiscal doors and probing minds open, and its students' minds free to offer their own, unique opinions unimpeded by parental beliefs.

After all, it's those parents who come from the Dark Ages, when talk of mental health was shoved under the carpet. If we're ever to make progress, let's let our kids speak for themselves. They can always opt out. They can choose not to answer survey questions. But creating an opt-in survey threatens students' rights to free speech and silences them from shedding light on this new era where open conversations about mental health makes sense.

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