

November 14, 2023

Dr. Paul Gausman
Lincoln Public Schools
5905 O Street
Lincoln, NE 68510

Dear Dr. Gausman:

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. My name is Kirk Penner, I am the Nebraska State Board of Education District 5 Representative. My district includes several Lincoln Public Schools (LPS). I am frequently contacted by concerned parents whose children attend LPS. They share the same concerns about classroom content that has dominated the news cycle nationally and is being taught at LPS. We should all be supportive of parents who want to take an active role in their children's education. Transparency and communication with parents about controversial content that LPS chooses, but is not mandated to teach, needs to greatly improve.

This past July, I had the opportunity to testify about transparency in front of the Nebraska Legislature's Education Committee. I warned the Senators that regardless of the law you pass or policy a school district creates, there are always ways around actually respecting a parent's role in their child's upbringing.

Fast forward to this fall at Lincoln Southwest High School. On September 28th, Planned Parenthood was scheduled to give a presentation to the Human Behavior class about STD's and how they spread, as well as completing an activity with students regarding safe sexual behaviors. After parents voiced concerns and were denied the opportunity to attend the presentation with their minor children due to "school safety and the desire to minimize distraction to learning," Lincoln Public Schools pulled the presentation by Planned Parenthood. Lincoln Public Schools admitted that the activity by Planned Parenthood did not meet their criteria.

On Monday, October 2nd, Emily Weber, from Family Health Services, located in Lincoln and Tecumseh, was invited to give a presentation about boundaries, safe sexual behaviors and what Family Health Services does for the community. Ms. Weber started the presentation informing minor children that if a "16-year-old would show up at the clinic and wanted services, the clinic wouldn't have to run their parent's insurance and if a parent or guardian would call and ask whether their child received services at the clinic, Family Health Services was not under any obligation to confirm or deny if their child received services at the clinic". She also informed the minor students that "Family Health Services had around 800 free Plan B abortion pills floating around in their storage room and since it is expensive, please stop by and we can help you out". She also stated the clinic had "plenty of lube and condoms and the clinic tried to keep 10,000 condoms on hand at all times" and "they are coming out of our ears".

Ms. Weber then had the students participate in an activity about boundaries. Minor children were given a set of eight questions about boundaries. The students were told not to put their names on the worksheet. Each question had three possible answers: Describes Me Completely, Describes Me Somewhat, Doesn't Describe Me at All. One question asked "I think if one person wants to try something new sexually, the other person should at least be willing to try it once" while another question asked "I think that if you're in a relationship with someone you kind of "belong" to each other. I should be able to touch them, and they should be able to touch me-when-ever-and -where-ever-we want." Minor children then turned in their worksheets and they were shuffled and redistributed to other minor children. The presenter then placed three signs around the room with the three answer choices printed on them. Each question was asked again to the group and each minor child was to stand by the sign that contained the answer on their worksheet. This is a classic manipulation tool using the power of suggestion. By forcing the minor children to stand by a sign they did not necessarily agree with, put them under stress and increased internal pressure. By visually separating the students, it

places the thought in some of the students' minds that they may not be normal or start to question their personal and family beliefs if they did not answer the question the way most of the kids answered.

Minor children were then forced to split into pairs to discuss the worksheet and the similarities or differences of the minor child's worksheet they were holding. Let me be abundantly clear, it is disgusting and might be criminal to force minor children to "pair up" and discuss the question "I think that if you're in a relationship with someone you kind of "belong" to each other. I should be able to touch them, and they should be able to touch me-when-ever-and where-ever-we want."

In an email exchange between Ms. Weber and classroom teacher Ms. Sarah Morrow, Ms. Weber told Ms. Morrow that the LPS curriculum specialist was asking for a meeting regarding some issues that arose regarding the presentation on Monday. "I am curious if you know what this is about so I can appropriately prepare. I had this presentation approved by LPS already and we have obviously done this many times."

As I stated earlier in this letter, regardless the law the legislature passes or policy a school district creates, there is always ways around those efforts. What I just detailed is a clear example of how a broad view is given about the curriculum of a class but the details of what exactly is being taught are left out. The description for the Family Health Services presentation was "speak with students about boundaries, safe sexual behaviors and what Family Services does for the community." It is evident that is not all that was discussed and even LPS had to have a discussion with Ms. Weber, but only after being contacted by concerned parents.

So many questions need to be asked:

1. Which staff member(s) at LPS believes it is a good idea to tell minor children where to get lube, condoms and abortion pills without parents' knowledge or does LPS believe they are the parent?
2. Were parents requesting that LPS inform their minor children where to get lube, condoms and abortion pills?
3. Why did LPS remove the Planned Parenthood presentation but allow the Family Health Services presentation?
4. Why did it take concerned parents to remove the Planned Parenthood presentation?
5. Why did it take concerned parents to force a conversation between district curriculum staff and Ms. Weber? According to Ms. Weber, this presentation was approved by LPS and had been given many times.
6. Why was abstinence briefly discussed and not allowed the same amount of time and energy as encouraging sexual activity of minor children if the class is truly about critical thinking?
7. During a time of immense mental health issues with our children, why would you place more stress on them by having them take part in uncomfortable group and one on one discussions about sex?
8. How do you objectively grade this class? What are the right or wrong answers? How do you gauge student achievement in this class?

The description for the Human Behavior class from Ms. Morrow, which is required for graduation, was "we will actively discuss domestic violence, healthy/unhealthy relationships, privilege, oppression and any topics that come up during class time surrounding said topics. (As a side note, let's be clear that the word privilege in the class description, is white privilege, and white privilege is being taught in this same human behavior class throughout LPS). She continues to tell parents she can "figure out" an alternative assignment or alternate placement during class time. Being vague about lessons and suggesting to the parents it is going to take extra effort on the part of the teacher to find an alternative is very common. The school believes it is being transparent regarding the Human Behavior class lessons because they gave an outline of what was being taught and the option of an alternative assignment or alternative placement. True transparency would have specifically listed the alternate assignment or alternative placement by Ms. Morrow including the specific content being taught. What if parents knew up front specifically what the presentation from Family Health Services would involve in the Human Behavior class? Would parents agree to let Family Health Services tell their minor children that they can come to their clinic without their parent's knowledge and give them the Plan B abortion pill? Ms. Weber enthusiastically stated the clinic had around 800 in their storage room. And if they needed lube or condoms, the clinic has over 10,000 condoms on hand.

In addition, would parents agree to let their minor child “pair up” with a fellow minor child and discuss where two minor children can touch each other? That is a lot different than a discussion about healthy/unhealthy relationships. The Human Behavior class is about critical thinking, how about letting a parent agree to allow their minor child to participate in the class if the parent can attend the presentation? The parent can then have a conversation with their minor child about what was presented. Why are parents really being prohibited from attending? Why is LPS hiding specific class lessons? Why does it always take being caught by a concerned parent to make a change in curriculum? True transparency isn’t hard to accomplish if the desire is there.

When constituents raise concerns to me, I want to follow up on those concerns. I believe we could agree that the goal of transparency between the teacher and parents on topics discussed with their minor children failed to meet any sort of transparency objectives of the district. I ask that LPS will take information like this seriously and stop hiding specific classroom content from parents with vague classroom content descriptions contained in soft “opt-out” policies at LPS. Be upfront at the start. Show parents the exact lessons without requiring them to ask for each lesson being taught. Transparency should be embraced at LPS and LPS should desire that parents know exactly what is being taught to their minor children.

I am formally requesting that LPS immediately implement a district wide “opt-in” policy for the Human Behavior class. Let parents know every discussion point and specifically what is being taught in that class every single day. Allow the parents to decide. Have alternate classes available with detailed information about what will be taught. I am also asking for the same amount of transparency to be written into policy by the Lincoln Public Schools Board of Education for every subject area being taught and implement that policy for the start of the 2024-2025 school year. Don’t hide curriculum from the parents or public. Take this opportunity to set the standard in curriculum transparency for the entire state of Nebraska.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kirk Penner".

Kirk Penner
State Board of Education, District 5