

# Parents outraged by school surveys on sexual activity

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SPECIAL TO THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

It was question No. 70 that floored Tiffany Libardi.

The mother of a sixth-grader, she first heard of the school survey from a fellow parent. All sixth-graders at Schaghticoke Middle School, it turns out, had filled out the survey in gym class Monday.

By Tuesday, many parents — concerned, confused, even livid — began to descend on the school in New Milford, Conn. One parent even pulled her child from the school.

The furor centered on a questionnaire that included 14 queries about student sexual activity. Some were explicit — such as No. 70's detailed query, asking children if they had ever had oral sex.

"I was ... angry that someone would take my child and decide what is best for them to know," says Mrs. Libardi.

Across the United States, more parents are rebelling against teen behavior surveys that they say are intrusive, inappropriate — and even encourage immoral behavior through suggestive questions.

While backers of the polls say they are useful tools to help communities know what children are thinking — and how to help them — a growing legion of parents are challenging the surveys. For instance:

• In Ridgewood, N.J., parents filed a federal lawsuit, claiming the school district failed to get their federally mandated approval on a 156-question youth survey. They also persuaded a lawmaker to sponsor preventive legislation that has passed the state Senate.

• In San Antonio, Texas, a lawsuit has resulted in the creation of a parent-teacher review board for all counseling initiatives and teen surveys. Now, parental consent is also required for such decisions, and there is a provision for the

shredding of all surveys after parents are given an opportunity to review them.

• In Radford, Va., the school board barred a survey with questions about drinking, drug use and sexual activity.

Yet surveys have numerous benefits, proponents say. In New Jersey, Virginia and Ohio, surveys were sponsored by the Minneapolis-based Search Institute. The company says healthy and well-adjusted children have 40 assets —

like a good home life and three square meals a day. It conducts its surveys to find out which assets children are lacking, then it passes the information along to community members.

More than 1 million children nationwide have been surveyed. Marianne Boyajian, president of the Naperville, Ill., Home and School Association, is an unabashed convert.

"I'm still sold on the concept," she says, noting that fewer than 10 parents there returned forms excusing their children from taking part in a survey.

Critics, however, see serious flaws. For one, they claim, school officials like the surveys because they often provide proof that many students are having trouble. Using the data, schools apply for more federal money to help these struggling students.

"The easiest, laziest way to get federal money is, you put a survey out to 2,000 kids, get your results,

and send it to Washington," says Ridgewood, N.J., parent Carole Nunn.

The president of the Ridgewood Board of Education and the superintendent of schools both declined to comment on the survey, citing a pending lawsuit.

For most parents, however, the chief concern is their right to prohibit their children from participating in the surveys. A federal law, the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment, provides such parental safeguards for any school survey involving federal funds. Passed in 1994, it requires "prior written consent of the parent" before a survey can be administered.

Likewise, several state lawmakers have taken up the parents' cause. The New Jersey bill mirrors the federal law, requiring signed parental consent for any survey financed by state, local or nonprofit funds. It has passed the state Senate and is awaiting a vote in the state House. A similar bill has been introduced in Ohio.

Parents and lawmakers object not only to the sexual questions on these surveys but also to broader queries, such as: "Have you ever considered killing yourself?"

Others object to how the questions are worded, saying they suggest illicit behavior and tacitly sanction it. For example, one question asks middle-school students not "if" but "When you have sex, how often do you use birth control?"