

Referendum 90 Discussion

Announcer: [00:00:00] The 2020 election is right around the corner. You may already have received your ballot. Over the past few months, Crystal Fincher, host of Hacks and Wonks has been getting to know the candidates and ballot measures that will appear on your ballot.

The following episode of Hacks and Wonks is part of our 2020 election coverage. To check out all Hacks and Wonks coverage go to officialhacksandwonks.com or visit the Hacks and Wonks Facebook Page at facebook.com/realhacksandwonks.

Crystal Fincher: [00:00:57] Welcome to Hacks and Wonks. I'm your host, Crystal Fincher. On this show, we don't just talk politics and policy, but also how they affect our lives and shape our communities. As we dive into the backstories behind what we read in the news, we bring voices to the table that we don't hear from often enough.

All right. Thank you for joining us here on Hacks and Wonks. We are thrilled today to be joined by Liezl Rebugio and Patrícia Flores here looking, talking about R-90. So I just wanted to start the conversation with both Liezl who is the campaign co-manager of the approve R-90 campaign and Field Director of the ACLU of Washington and Patrícia who's the Advocacy Coordinator for Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs. And just start by asking what brought you to this campaign? Why is this issue important to you?

Liezl T. Rebugio: [00:01:56] Well, I'm happy to go first. Thank you for having us here Crystal. Delighted to have this time to talk with you and have your listeners hear about approve Referendum 90. Well, what brought me here today was, personally, I was able to receive sex education in the sixth grade and in high school. But it wasn't comprehensive. And I really wish that it was. It didn't include information about healthy relationships, about personal boundaries. And, I really feel had that been included in my own sex education experience that would have saved me a lot of years of harm, hurt and disempowerment.

But now as a mother of two young children, I have two glorious and very sweet and extremely fierce girls. I have a two year old and a four year old. And I want them to grow up to have a better education than I did so that they have all the information that they need to make really good choices so that they have a safe and healthy future. And so that they are empowered to make decisions that will impact the rest of their lives. So that's why I'm here today.

Crystal Fincher: [00:03:27] Yes. And Patrícia what brings you to this campaign and why do you feel so passionately about it?

Patrícia Flores: [00:03:34] Thank you for the invitation Crystal to be here with Liezl and to talk about this important, important campaign. It's again, as Liezl said, for me, it's personal also. I'm in my sixth decade of life and I had health education in the seventh grade that talked about our menstrual cycle. That was it. That's not very comprehensive in seventh grade. So I'm excited that our kids - I am the mother of three adults and I have 11 grandchildren ranging in age from 27 to almost two months old. And I'm really excited that they will receive the right information, the developmentally appropriate information in

school. It's really important. It's part, it has to be part of the curriculum, teaching the whole child. And it has to be K-12 and like I said, developmentally appropriate for each developmental stage and build from there, you don't just begin in the seventh grade or as Liezl said, the sixth grade. I'm also the Advocacy Coordinator at Washington Coalition Sexual Assault Programs. Prevention is huge. We have - a lot of people know the statistics about sexual assault and so really it's that analogy of taking the victims of whatever out of the water. Why don't we go and see how they're getting into the water in the first place? What happened over here? What are the roots? That's how it's going to change because people are okay with objectifying certain human beings and that is learned, and it's got to stop.

Crystal Fincher: [00:05:39] Right. I mean, and I have similar experiences to what you experienced with. Certainly I learned about my menstrual cycle, at least a little bit about it. There was certainly a lot that I didn't learn in school about it. There was a lot that wasn't covered about sex and sexuality. So I guess really initially I'm wondering for people who just aren't familiar with what Referendum 90 does, what does it do? What does it mean to provide comprehensive sex education? What is involved with that?

Liezl T. Rebugio: [00:06:18] Sure. So I'm happy to answer that question. Thank you for asking. So comprehensive sex education is age appropriate, medically accurate and inclusive instruction that teaches young people about bodily development, sexual activity, sexuality, contraception, how to avoid sexually transmitted infections, how to avoid unintended pregnancies, how to make informed decisions, and how to give consent.

It includes sexual orientation and gender identity. It covers healthy relationships and intimacy and also covers intimate partner violence. And for younger students, K-3, sex education will focus on social, emotional learning. So that includes personal boundaries, human development. How do I identify and talk to a trusted adult? How do I, how do I identify and manage emotions, empathize with others, regulate behaviors, make good decisions. Comprehensive sex education includes a lot of topics and these are topics that will be the foundation for our young people to make smart and healthy decisions going forward into adulthood.

Crystal Fincher: [00:07:46] Well, and we've heard a lot about these terms and what that means and some confusing information about it. So when you're talking about contraception and talking about STD prevention, there are people who hear that and think, are they going to be teaching my child to have sex. Are they going to be encouraging sexual activity? This is something, you know, we don't want to introduce early in lives. Are they going to be teaching young kids stuff that is, it's not appropriate for them? How do you respond? What does this actually do?

Liezl T. Rebugio: [00:08:26] R-90 will provide information to young people so that they can make the decision whether or not to have sex. And also how to say no and how to receive a no. So sexual assault prevention is really key in comprehensive sex education. Also, if we don't provide this to our students, they're going to learn it elsewhere. So I can speak from my own personal experience as a Filipino American, within the Asian American Pacific Islander community, talking about sex and reproductive health, it can be a taboo topic.

And so if we don't get the tools, then we're having to rely to get that information from our families. And because it can be a taboo topic within our community, we may not get that at all. So then young people will then have to rely on friends, the internet and the media, and that's not going to necessarily mean they're going to be getting medically accurate information.

Crystal Fincher: [00:09:40] When we're looking at this, so this is really, not just sexual education, but really kind of body autonomy, boundary setting. And so I guess looking for what kids are, what is, you know, appropriate touch and inappropriate, what, you know, you have the ability to say no if someone is touching in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable. Is it that kind of messaging that's happening? Is it different than that? Is that kind of what is getting it to on the young end?

Liezl T. Rebugio: [00:10:16] Yes, absolutely. What we know right now is that there are young people, children who are in abusive situations and through comprehensive sex education, they will be provided the tools - how to identify abusive situations so that they can, one, learn how to identify trusted adults. And then two, know how to talk about it with that trusted adult. You know, when I think about how the lack of comprehensive sex education impacts communities of color, think about this. In the African American community, this is from the National Center of Violence Against Women in the Black Community. They report that one in four black girls will be sexually abused before the age of 18.

And 40 to 60% of black women report being subjected to coercive sexual contact by the age of 18. So it's really important for our young people in the state to get this information so they know what's happening to them, they know how to say no, other people know how to receive that no, and also how young people would know who to go to if they're experiencing this.

Crystal Fincher: [00:11:40] That's a very good point and Patricia, with your work as Advocacy Coordinator for the Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs, these numbers probably are not surprising you. And this is fundamentally an issue of safety for so many people.

Patricia Flores: [00:11:57] It is, it is. And the numbers are not surprising. If anybody would like to check the numbers out, they can go to our website, which is WCSAP, our acronym, wcsap.org, here in Washington state. But they can also go to rainn.org, which is a biggest national sexual prevention organization. rainn.org. And one of the statistics they have on the main site is every nine minutes, child protective services substantiates or finds evidence for a claim of child sexual abuse. Every nine minutes. 70, excuse me. 7% child sexual abuse by strangers. 59% by acquaintances, 39% or 34% by family members. And I will speak of my own personal experience. And that I experienced sexual molestation by a family member at like 15. And I didn't tell anybody, so these statistics are low, they are low.

And there are other people in my family that I will not share their stories because they're not for me to share, but I can share my own. And the statistics are much higher. So if we can get children in kindergarten and teach them how we respect ourselves first and then how we respect each other. My sister, her granddaughter is I think six, and she's got a couple of

granddaughters that age. And they were playing with one another. And one of them said to the other, "You're in my space and you need to step back. This is my space and you need to listen to me." And it took the other one who was very gregarious and outgoing extrovert to just say, you know, those words makes you pause. Like, why can't I be close to you? Because it's making me uncomfortable.

At that age if we can, can you imagine the world we would live in. The objectification of people that is, let's talk about that. And let's talk about why some people want to keep things in status quo.

Crystal Fincher: [00:14:21] You're listening to Hacks and Wonks with your host Crystal Fincher on KVRU 105.7 FM

You know, that's a big question. And I think some people, when first hearing about this - people grow up with, with, you know, a lot of different kinds of context around sex and sexuality. There is a lot of, you know, hiding of it, there's a lot of shame. There's a lot that just isn't talked about. And I know that, you know, initially a lot of people don't think about this in the context of safety and keeping our kids safe and they think, "Oh, this is something scary for kids."

But, you know, I certainly speaking, as a black woman, and really looking at how under-reported this is within the black community certainly. There are issues where kids have, you know, it's hard to put messages in context a lot of times and we certainly teach our kids to be respectful of adults. To, you know, follow directions. To, you know, respect authority, which is great in the correct context.

But there are people who take advantage of that and we have to equip our kids with - just like you were talking about, Hey, Hey, that's my space. This is my body. And it's actually okay for me to say no and control who is touching my body, who is interacting with me personally. And when you talk about comprehensive, that's a message that a lot of kids just never get. And, and then they have a hard time understanding - do I have to always follow directions and respect authority and not question? Do my, if I feel uncomfortable, is that normal? What do I do with that? And so, you know, absolutely equipping kids in my estimation with the ability to say, Hey, it is okay. If you feel uncomfortable, if you feel icky, if someone is touching you in an area that they should not be, you can say no. You can, and give them the tools to help prevent that, intervene, to stop it as soon as possible.

Patricia Flores: [00:16:45] Talk to a trusted adult.

Crystal Fincher: [00:16:47] Yeah. Yes. Cause we get so many stories of kids who just didn't know what to do and they just didn't know how to handle it. They knew that they didn't feel right, but they didn't know if they would or could or should do something about it and if that would be okay. So certainly as an issue of just safety and thinking about how this could have impacted people in my life, who I know, certainly would help. And in terms of older kids to teens and adults, issues of contraception, having safe and safer sex, the implications of relationships and what is appropriate and healthy, what is toxic or abusive or manipulative. With something so subjective, how is that handled within a curriculum?

Liezl T. Rebugio: [00:17:48] Thank you for that question. So Referendum 90 doesn't place districts in a position where they have to use a certain curriculum. There is a list of approved curriculum that OSPI will provide. If districts aren't happy with that, they are also invited to find something that works for their community. They can develop their own as well. But there are standards that curriculum have to meet. For example, the mandate is you have to climb this mountain. OSPI is going to say, you can climb the mountain, however, it's for your hikers. You can pick your own trail. You can take breaks when you want to, but you have to climb this mountain.

And that's important because each community is different. Each district is different and comprised of different kinds of communities and different kinds of students and different needs. So what Seattle chooses is not going to look the same as what Toppenish or Spokane chooses. And that's really important because the communities look different.

So what R-90 requires is that the district communicates and collaborates with parents in selecting a curriculum. And parents also have the ultimate authority in opting out if they don't want their child to receive sex education.

Crystal Fincher: [00:19:30] So it seems like this, actually, brings this in line with most of the other subjects that are taught in school. Hey, if this is something that is covered, these are the benchmarks that need to be met. These are, you know, generally the things that you need to cover. But schools get to choose their own curriculum. They get to choose how they accomplish those objectives and customize it to their own needs. And I guess it goes a step further, even beyond all the other curriculum in school in giving the parents an opt out if they feel strongly enough to want to not have their kids involved - they still have that option.

Liezl T. Rebugio: [00:20:12] That's correct. And the, I just want to emphasize the importance of offering this to our students, because it's important for our kids to learn about affirmative consent. It's important for students to learn about what a trusted adult looks like, treats them, et cetera. It's important for them to know how to communicate when they're feeling uncomfortable or unsafe in a situation. And comprehensive sex education is going to help produce better health outcomes. If I can just share some other examples of what it can look like if we don't provide this education. If we think about the communities that get the brunt of everything. And those are our BIPOC communities. We think of, if we look at how black folks and African Americans are impacted by STIs for example. Black folks and African Americans account for a higher proportion of new HIV diagnoses and people with HIV compared to other races and ethnicities. Just two years ago in 2018, black folks, African-Americans accounted for 13% of the US population, but 42% of the newly 38,000 HIV diagnoses in the United States.

That's unacceptable. That's unacceptable. And for me to view native females between the ages of 15 and 19, have the third highest teen birth rates among all racial and ethnic groups, and the highest repeat teen birth rate. And native youth are also disproportionately affected by STIs, including HIV. And if we look at the Asian American community. Though, in my community, the teen birth rate has gone down, when you dig into the specific ethnic groups, it's not pretty. There was a study done in the Twin City area where there's a large population of Hmong folks. That study found that 50% of Hmong girls between the ages of 15 and 19 -

either had children or became pregnant before they graduated high school. That's huge. And these health outcomes can have a huge effect as a person grows older. So that's why comprehensive sex education is so important to get while our students are young and while they're in school. The CDC says that we don't teach our kids sex education early enough. College is too late. If there's ever a time to listen to the CDC, now is the time. Comprehensive, medically accurate and evidence based sex education, and inclusive sex education is a healthy way forward for better health outcomes for our young people in this state. Who doesn't want that for their kids? We should all want that.

Crystal Fincher: [00:23:41] We should absolutely all want that. And I think for so many people and especially in BIPOC communities, among people of color, you know, there is. There are upbringings that we hear and teachings that we hear that discouraged talking about it, that hate talking about it, and providing this kind of information is scary, and we're afraid of what's going to happen or what choices they may make if they have access to more information. But it really appears to be from all of the available data from, you know, everyone from the CDC to victims, advocacy groups, and survivors advocacy groups. Everyone who has to deal with these populations across the board is saying the consequences of not providing this information are so much more devastating and life altering than providing it. And we actually need to start listening to that. Is that what you're seeing?

Patricia Flores: [00:24:50] It's critical. The information is critical and we're doing such a disservice and all of the numbers are showing that, right? And what Liezl said about the STIs and the HIV, which is included in the STI numbers. That is unacceptable, that's putting it lightly. And so how are we going to change this? It's by intercepting, getting in there and teaching children at kindergarten level about their own agency and their voice, helping them use their voice, helping them listen to other, their classmates' voices, and be respectful. These are when these things are taught. And then it's a building block and then to get to the next developmental stage, and there's more and more. And what's going to happen, then, we're going to see all of these statistics decrease and we're the only ones who can do it for our own. And so we've got to show up. And vote and approve R-90.

Crystal Fincher: [00:26:02] And so this is a situation where potentially the approve or not approve, yes or no. What does a yes vote mean?

Patricia Flores: [00:26:11] The Yes vote pushes it forward, approves it as law. Liezl, do you have anything to add to that? About the Yes vote?

Crystal Fincher: [00:26:28] So it sounds like vote Yes for comprehensive education, comprehensive sex education, for teaching kids about their bodies and boundaries and healthy relationships, and just making sure they have the information available. But I guess in your work, is there any evidence that teaching kids more about their bodies and about sex and sexuality at age appropriate levels - is there any information to show that that causes younger people to have sex - that just receiving the information motivates people to be sexually active.

Patrícia Flores: [00:27:11] I don't believe there's anything that connects the dots like that. But again, the statistics are the statistics. And that is showing, and like I said, they're really lower than what they are because I never spoke out. There are many of us and you mentioned that also Crystal, that we do not speak out because there's a trust issue. And what does it matter? It will not change anything. And so Liezl - you would like to add something to approving R-90?

Liezl T. Rebugio: [00:27:44] So thank you for asking, What does it mean to approve R-90?

So when we approve R-90, that means it will uphold a new law that was passed earlier this year - that would require all public schools to offer comprehensive sex education to students in public schools, K through 12. And for students in kindergarten through third grade, that would focus on social, emotional learning.

So, as Patrícia mentioned, that's focusing on personal boundaries, learning how to identify a trusted adult, learning how to identify and manage their emotions. Learning how to be a good friend. So they're really the basic life skills that our students in K through three will learn through social, emotional learning. That is what will be required under referendum 90.

So that's why we need to approve it.

Crystal Fincher: [00:28:49] Well, I appreciate the time that both of you have taken to help us learn more about this, to understand what it means and the consequences of not providing that information and not educating our kids about that. Certainly, providing more context and, and helping us to understand that sometimes when we hear sex education for kids, it's scary, but really this is, this helps. This actually helps eliminate a lot of the scary things that we're afraid of. And so hopefully people can get more information. Tell me one more time, what the website is?

Liezl T. Rebugio: [00:29:33] It's approve90wa.org.

Crystal Fincher: [00:29:39] Well, excellent. So if people are interested in more information, they can certainly visit that site and research the information for yourself. There certainly is a lot out there. I mean, certainly Patrícia, looking at the Washington Coalition for Sexual Education. It is critically important that we keep our kids safe and that we equip our kids with the information and tools necessary to make sure that their bodies are respected and that they're kept safe in the long-term and can make healthy decisions for their lives.

So appreciate it. And we will speak with you next time.

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Catch you on the other side.