

Re: HB 5688 – Relating to Health and Safety – Parents Bill of Rights

March 28, 2023

To: Members of the RI House Education Committee

From: Catherine C. Vieira-Baker, PhD., Licensed Psychologist

Whereas I would agree that parents need to raise their children as they see fit and that part of the process includes making choices about their child's education (public, private, parochial, homeschool), I have grave concerns that this bill is sweeping, an overreach that promotes an adversarial position between educational professionals who have been trained in ways to teach content and in ways to support learning, and a ploy to undermine the very mission of the public education system.

There are many who would interpret the word "direct" as giving parents explicit permission to demand educators change the content or teaching methods to conform with their way of thinking about the world. There are parents who might object to teaching evolution and push to "direct" the school to stop teaching such content. Others might object to discussions of various points of view and insist on those ideas be squashed. As someone who works in schools, I have seen the damage that gets done when parents expect their wishes to be granted by the school district in terms of their special education student, sometimes such demands fly in the face of the special education laws. The mission of the public schools is to provide a free and appropriate education for ALL students. Allowing a selected group of individuals who have the loudest voices and who make the most intimidating statements would rob other students of their free and appropriate education while impinging on the free exchange of ideas within the safety of the learning environment.

Whereas parental involvement is a strong predictor of academic achievement, the language regarding the right to know the "purpose" of each and every lesson again sets up an adversarial relationship. Some of the best lessons occur in the spontaneous exchange of ideas among and between students. And if a parent does not agree or see the purpose of a particular lesson? Is a teacher expected to craft 25 different lesson plans to satisfy parents. I think parents who are genuinely

interested in the educational process would be able to work collaboratively with teachers and administrators for the progress of ALL students.

As a psychologist who works in schools, I have grave concerns over the limitations around teaching medical and psychological content. It would be illegal for a nurse within the school to provide direct services to a minor child in the case of injury or illness? Would a distressed child be turned away from a mental health provider, such as the school counselor, because there is no permission slip? This cruel! Would health, biology, and anatomy/physiology classes be suspended? Would it be illegal to teach children deep breathing techniques to reduce anxiety and to increase attention? This puts school districts in an untenable position.

What this bill is REALLY about is DISMANTLING the educational system, promoting an ignorant populous that can be easily led by nefarious leaders who want to subvert democracy, and moving this country closer to a more restrictive form of government. The “thought police” that would control classroom content are even wanting to control what students do after school hours. Based on this proposed legislation, clubs and activities, which are essentially student-led at the post-secondary level, would be under scrutiny by the government. Those who claim to want less governmental interference are supportive of that interference if it serves to control their adversaries. This is an attempt to stifle student voices and limit student interests. This is a very dangerous precedent and has no business in this country or this state.

I sincerely hope that the Committee recognizes the political agenda that has fueled this bill. I sincerely hope that you will provide a resounding NO when faced with efforts to marginalize, silence, and omit groups of people from the discussion and that you uphold the mission of the public educational system as a system designed provide a common foundation for all children.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.