

Testimony in Opposition to H7781—Dr. Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur

I write to you today in opposition to H7781. This dangerous bill represents a coordinated effort to undermine the education of Rhode Island's young people, ensuring that they are not prepared to fully participate in civic or professional life. It is based on myths and innuendo about the nature of education and seek to take away decisions about curriculum and pedagogy from experienced, skilled professionals who have specific expertise in designing learning experiences for our community's children.

In §16-71-7(a)(3), the language would give parents the right to object to *any* aspect of the school curriculum or learning materials on the basis of *any* aspect of personal belief. It is worth considering the implications of such a provision: a parent could object to their child learning about the Constitution of the United State of America because they believe democracy is a satanic plot. A parent could object to their child reading the writings of Roger Williams or Washington's *Letter to Touro Synagogue* because they believe learning about religious liberty is harmful to their child's moral development. A parent could object to their daughter learning algebra because they believe, as did some physicians in the 1800s, that learning challenging material is damaging to the development of the ovaries. Or, as has recently occurred in Florida,ⁱ a parent could object to the curriculum of an art history class containing any nudes because they believe it is immoral for their child to lay eyes on genitals that have been carved in stone.

§ 23-100-5 would prevent young people in need of medical attention from access that needed care. Here, let me share with you a personal story. When I was a young person, about 16 years of age, my parents were out of the country on vacation. I experienced an episode of compacted earwax while they were away—a medical problem that is not dangerous enough to need emergency care, but which was extremely painful. The necessary treatment was short non-invasive use of a microsuction device to vacuum out the wax, but I was not permitted to access the treatment because my parents could not be reached to consent. My grandparents were even available, but that was not sufficient—just as it would not be under H7781. Today, with cellphones, it would often be easier to reach a parent—but not to obtain written consent. And of course, parents are still not always—what about a parent who is in a coma, hiking outside of cellphone range, etc.? My experience has made me a firm believer that young people need to be able to access medical care even when their parents are unavailable, and that while parental consent may be important in some cases, urgent non-emergency care should not require a court order.

Taken in its entirety, this bill is designed to ensure that the children of Rhode Island are unable to obtain a high-quality education designed to prepare them for contemporary life or access necessary medical care in a timely fashion. Thus, I urge you to reject H7781. I urge you to stand up for the children of the State of Rhode Island, who deserve an education in which they are able to learn about the world as it is, to develop the capacity for free inquiry, and to experience schools that believe their lives and communities matter. Thank you.

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ⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/mar/25/florida-principal-resigns-michelangelo-david>