

Dear House Education Committee and Representative Azzinaro,

As a father to a child in an elementary school in Westerly and an active PTO member at my child's school, I'm asking you to reject H5837, an attempted amendment to Chapter 22 of the Rhode Island Education Act (Title 16).

The first problem with H5837 is procedural. It makes no mention of the existing law in this area: parents already have the right, under Section 16-22-18 to opt their minor children out of family life and sex education courses. They have the same right under Section 16-22-24, regarding dating violence education. H5837 doesn't say that it will remove Section 16-22-18 or 16-22-24 or affect them in any other way. If H5837 becomes law, then you would have multiple laws on the books with completely contradictory procedures. Needless to say, that's not how law-making should work.

My second problem with it is that it doesn't define what "sexual education" means. Section 16-22-18 specifies that it's talking about health, family life, and sex education courses, and at least provides an outline of what those courses include. Section 16-22-24 also specifies the subject it's talking about. The term "sexual education" is strange. "Sex education" is far more commonly used. Why introduce a new term when the existing law and common practice already uses a widely understood term: "sex education"? But more importantly, because the proposed law doesn't define what it means -- whether this is in the context of health courses or something else -- schools won't understand how to implement it. If students are reading Romeo and Juliet, which implies a sexual relationship between the main characters, do their students' parents have to consent to that part of the curriculum?

The third problem is that this whole "opt-in" process is unworkable in practice. Imagine classrooms across the state. Half of the parents in a classroom have consented to the curriculum, some parents have explicitly not consented, and a bunch of parents haven't even received the permission form from their kid to know that they need to consent in the first place. What does the teacher do?

To me, this law seems more like an attempt to erase sex education in schools. Parents already have the right to opt their children out of sex education courses. Even this is a strange privilege; as far as I know parents don't have the right to opt their children out of learning mathematics or English. But which facts are likely to be relevant to them in their everyday lives -- facts about sex and relationships or facts about the quadratic formula?

Let's preserve evidence-based curricula and go about changing the law wisely rather than haphazardly.

Best,
Ben

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