

Dear Committee Members,

I am writing today in opposition to bill H8531. My name is Sam Chesser, and my family and I have been homeschooling in Rhode Island since we moved to the state in 2021. I have always appreciated the status of homeschooling in Rhode Island. I previously lived in a state with virtually no contact or regulation of homeschool. In contrast, here in Rhode Island, we have a robust system for keeping in contact with the school committee members. There is a good sense of the numbers of homeschoolers as well as names, which allows some level of record-keeping while also preserving the rights of a family to educate their children how they see fit.

I am concerned about the bill which is currently in front of the committee. My concerns are several. First, the issue of truancy in schools. I have been heavily involved with the homeschool community in Rhode Island, and have met many homeschooled families. A surprising number began their homeschooling process because bullying in the school became so pernicious that it was a legitimate danger to the child's mental health to continue in school. I am concerned that with greater regulation of this process, it will be even more difficult to protect bullied children in the situation, convincing parents to keep their kids in school longer for fear of legal retaliation. We still have strong truancy laws in place in Rhode Island; instead of writing new, redundant rules that just complicate the system, we should simply enforce our current laws which provide a pathway for vulnerable students while still holding bad actors accountable.

Second, I'm concerned about the confusion that this bill could bring to homeschooling families. Right now, we have a clear process, understood by both families and school districts, for registering a child for homeschooling. If this bill were to pass, it would complicate matters greatly. The vague wording of the bill would leave families confused about their status and create panic. It also runs the risk of confusing the school districts. Right now, we have clear legal precedent that outlines how all districts should behave. With this new language, I am concerned that the interpretations would vary, so that a child might be eligible to homeschool in Warwick but be denied in Cranston. This would also create a distractingly large amount of work for the school committees and keep them from their other work.

Finally, the language about competency in this bill concerns me. I know that the language of the bill is intended to protect children from abusive homes, a laudable goal. But school committees have become increasingly politicized across the nation. What if a school district decided that an LGBTQI+ family was not "competent" to homeschool their children due to not being a "traditional nuclear family"? What if a religious family was denied because their views were seen as incompatible? This language is a slippery slope and I fear unintended consequences.

In closing, I urge you to vote against this bill. Right now, Rhode Island homeschooling is in a good place, prioritizing both freedom while still protecting children. Please ensure this is not jeopardized.

Sam Chesser