

Written Testimony in Opposition to H.8531

Name: Tara Shoemaker

Organization: Rhode Island Homeschool Parent

Bill Number: H.8531

Viewpoint: Opposed

Chair and Members of the Committee,

I am writing in strong and unequivocal opposition to H.8531.

I have homeschooled my children for the past five years. During that time, I have seen them flourish academically, emotionally, and socially. H.8531 threatens the freedom that has made that growth possible by giving local school committees broad authority to delay or deny a parent's decision to homeschool based on vague and subjective standards.

Homeschooling is not an educational experiment for our family. It is a deliberate and deeply considered choice.

It allows me to provide each child with an education tailored to his or her individual abilities, interests, and needs. My children are not forced to sit idle while waiting for classmates to catch up, nor do they lose valuable instructional time while a teacher manages disruptions and behavioral problems. They complete their work efficiently, explore subjects in depth, and use rich, engaging materials that would be impossible to provide in a classroom where one teacher must divide attention among twenty or more students.

The results are evident in our everyday life.

My seven-year-old recently asked if we could get a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* because she wanted to read it. My ten-year-old son casually used the phrase "obscuring my vision" in conversation. These are simple moments, but they reflect children who are intellectually curious, articulate, and genuinely excited to learn.

Homeschooling also allows me to protect my children from harms that are all too common in institutional school settings.

My husband and I both experienced bullying as students.

In public school, other children pulled my hair, stuffed bugs down my clothing, spied on me while I used the restroom, and subjected me to constant ridicule and degrading language. I still remember the humiliation of knowing that adults saw what was happening and largely treated it as a normal part of childhood.

I also witnessed a classmate expose himself to the entire classroom. I was six years old.

These were not harmless childhood incidents. They were deeply distressing experiences that left a lasting impression.

I was in eighth grade when the Columbine High School massacre occurred. My generation was the first to undergo lockdown drills. I remember how terrifying it was to realize that school was no longer automatically a safe place.

Today, that fear is even more justified. Tragically, school shootings have become so common that they are almost treated as routine.

My children do not live with that fear.

They are not exposed to bullying, drug use, sexual misconduct, or the anxiety that comes from hearing about the latest act of violence in a school. They learn in a peaceful environment where they are safe, known, and loved.

Before becoming a homeschooling parent, I taught students from Pre-K through 11th grade in private schools. I have seen firsthand how even excellent teachers are limited by the realities of the classroom. No matter how dedicated they are, they must divide their attention among many students while managing discipline issues and a wide range of academic and emotional needs.

In one eighth-grade class I taught, there was a student whom every teacher handled with extreme caution because we believed he had the potential for violence. After his parents withdrew him, he brought brass knuckles to his next school.

Just last week, a public school teacher from this state told me that she would never send her own children to public school—not even the school where she teaches.

That should concern every member of this committee.

My children are educated in a peaceful environment where they are safe, known, and deeply loved. They learn reading, writing, mathematics, science, and history alongside responsibility, self-discipline, respectful communication, and practical life skills from the people most committed to their well-being.

Most importantly, I believe that raising and educating my children is both my God-given right and my solemn duty.

No teacher, administrator, or government official can know my children as intimately as I do. No institution can love them, defend them, or sacrifice for them the way their parents can.

Rhode Island already has a legal framework that allows parents to homeschool with oversight from their local school committee. That framework has successfully served families in this state for decades.

H.8531 would dramatically alter that arrangement by shifting the presumption away from parents and toward government control.

Under this bill, homeschooling would no longer be treated as a lawful exercise of parental authority. Instead, parents would be required to convince school officials that they are sufficiently competent and that homeschooling is in the “best interest” of their own children.

Those standards are subjective and undefined. They invite inconsistent decisions based on personal opinions rather than objective educational criteria.

The bill would also allow school committees to keep children enrolled in public school while a homeschooling request is under review, even when parents have determined that remaining in that environment is not in their child’s best interest.

Perhaps most troubling, the bill would eliminate a family’s current right to appeal an unfavorable decision directly to the Superior Court, forcing parents into a lengthy administrative process before they could seek review by an independent judge.

Taken together, these provisions would give government officials broad discretion to override the decisions of fit and loving parents.

Parents should not have to ask the state for permission to protect their children, tailor their education, or raise them according to their convictions.

H.8531 assumes that bureaucrats are better positioned than parents to decide what is best for a child. That assumption is deeply flawed and contrary to the longstanding principle that parents have the primary right and responsibility to direct the upbringing and education of their children.

There is no evidence that Rhode Island's current homeschool law is failing. This bill does not address a demonstrated problem. It simply places new obstacles in front of families who are already doing an excellent job educating their children.

For families like mine, homeschooling is not a loophole or a convenience. It is a carefully considered commitment to our children's safety, education, and well-being.

H.8531 would make it easier for the state to interfere with that commitment and harder for parents to act in their children's best interests.

I respectfully and urgently urge you to reject H.8531 and preserve the fundamental right of Rhode Island parents to direct the education, upbringing, and protection of their children.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Tara Shoemaker

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