

Testimony by: The Humane Society of the United States
In reference to: H.B. 5423
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On behalf of the over 180,000 members and supporters of The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) in Connecticut, we submit this testimony in SUPPORT of H.B. 5423

Why Create a Student Choice Policy?

Student choice policies provide all students with the chance to enjoy a biology education and develop their skills in science without participating in instructional methods that involve the harming or killing of animals. 'Student choice' enables all students, regardless of ethical or religious beliefs, to receive a high quality biology education. Student choice policies do not 'ban' dissection or other animal exercises; they simply allow students the option to learn without the harm or killing of animals. They involve minimal re-evaluation of instructional methods, while free services such as those provided by the HSUS can provide teachers with the most contemporary information about matching non-dissection resources to their current teaching methods. There are several reasons why student choice policies are compatible with both curriculum and teacher's requirements, which are outlined below:

Science teachers support student choice. A survey of participants at the National Science Teachers Association 2001 annual convention revealed that the majority of high school science teachers supported student choice in dissection. A further HSUS survey of 5000 biology teachers throughout the United States found that 66% of respondents supported student choice, while a further 13.5 % were neutral on the issue. Furthermore, teachers who had experience of using methods other than dissection consistently reported that these resources had a positive effect on their teaching.

Many students have genuine objections to dissection and live animal exercises. Students' objections are often motivated by a deeply held belief in the value of life, or by concern over inhumane husbandry or killing practices, rather than squeamishness or unwillingness to work. Husbandry and killing practices subject many of the approximately six million vertebrate animals killed each year for dissection in U. S. schools to suffering prior to death. Students who object to dissection *want* to learn, they simply do not want to harm animals in the process.

Student choice protects freedom of ethical and religious belief. In numerous cases throughout the United States, students have had to resort to legal action to gain a biology education that does not compromise their ethical or religious beliefs. Freedom of ethical and religious belief has been supported by law in these cases. Student choice policies prevent potentially damaging conflicts over biology education, so that the school, teacher, student, and the animals all gain the best result.

Students who choose alternatives receive an equivalent education. More than twenty published scientific research studies show that students who use alternatives learn anatomy and physiology as well as, or better than, students who use animals.

The quality of biology education resources has increased substantially in recent years and now allows for a fully interactive and hands-on learning experience. Students opting out of dissection are not opting out of learning; rather they would complete an activity of equivalent difficulty as other students.

Alternatives are widely available. There are a diverse range of resources available for biology instruction. The HSUS' Humane Education Loan Program (HELP) provides a free consultation service from biological scientists, plus free loan of biology teaching resources to enable teachers to try out the latest technology in their lessons. Teachers can find resources that suit their lesson plans and fit with their style of teaching, with minimal effort, through free assistance from The HSUS. Most importantly, the re-usability and durability of non-dissection resources means that in the long-term, they are cheaper than the one-time destruction of individual animals.

Coming into Line with Best Practice

Fifteen states already have statewide dissection choice laws or policies in place, including California, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont and Virginia.

High school dissection activities are not a pre-requisite for veterinary or medical science. Students who choose not to dissect animals at high school will not be prevented from gaining entrance to medical or veterinary school. All but one of the U.S. medical schools don't require participation in live animal classes or animal dissections. In veterinary school, many institutions offer the opportunity to learn by studying animals in clinical settings and practicing skills on ethically sourced animal cadavers. Therefore, a student who is suitably academically gifted would be able to pursue a future career in human or veterinary medicine, while maintaining their ethical perspective. It would be appalling should such a potential student be penalized for their compassionate beliefs if compulsorily required to complete dissection in high school.

In conclusion, student choice policies prevent potentially damaging conflicts over biology education, and provide a positive outcome for the school, teacher and student. Student choice policies ensure that all students can gain a high quality biology education, increasing the opportunities available for compassionate students to pursue future careers in science and medicine. They require minimal revision of teaching practice; in fact teachers demonstrably support student choice. Student choice policies allow all students to enjoy learning while respecting their ethical beliefs.

The HSUS firmly believes that this is a good bill. It is timely and progressive. It will deprive no one of a right to dissect if they wish to dissect and will most likely attract other students to science. It will make life-science education in the state of Connecticut more fair, more compassionate, and more democratic. We urge your support of H.B. 5423.