From: anthony sorge [mailto:anthonysorge@hotmail.com]
Sent: Tuesday, February 15, 2011 4:58 PM
To: Giannaros, Elizabeth
Subject: Dissection

As a high school teacher, I know that animal dissection has long been considered a rite of passage for most high school students: many students, teachers, and parents agree that the practice is a controversial but necessary part of any high school education, an often uncomfortable but ultimately rewarding experience akin to studying Shakespeare. Indeed, when asked about their most memorable high school classes or teachers, many adults reflect on the day they had to dissect a frog or fetal pig. However, while these "experiments" are indeed "memorable," what students remember long after the lesson has ended is not the valuable insights into the scientific process that they gained from the dissection, but their own discomfort with the procedure, a gruesome exercise in controlling one's gag reflex. Moreover, the most notable thing a student "learns" from animal dissection lessons is that their discomfort with or disapproval of the lesson--whether on ethical grounds or simply because of a weak stomach--is something to be ashamed of, something that disqualifies them from the world of academic research and scientific discovery; they learn that to be sensitive and empathetic to a creature as lowly as a frog or a fetal pig is the sign of a weak, undisciplined mind. They learn that their ethics and their objections do not matter and are not respected, that they must silence their conscience and curb their squeamishness or face academic or even disciplinary consequences.

There may have been a time when this strong-arming of students into animal dissection was considered a gruesome but necessary academic rite of passage, but that time has clearly passed. When both the National Science Teachers Association and the National Association of Biology Teachers encourage dissection choice policies, and when fifteen states already have laws and policies allowing students to opt out of dissection lessons, it seems foolish for Connecticut schools to cling to this grisly and outdated practice. And it IS outdated: in an era in which advances in technology have provided students with unprecedented access to lessons, activities, and instructional strategies that promote higher-order thinking and 21st century skills, a classroom full of students slitting the pallid bellies of dead frogs seems embarrassingly archaic. Affordable and reusable computer programs and DVDs present the skills and concepts students would ostensibly gain from a dissection lesson without the need for new supplies of dead animals every year, and more importantly, without the need for students to struggle with the discomfort or moral disapproval of actual dissection.

It is crucially important that Connecticut provide students with the choice to opt out of animal dissection lessons. If we continue to make these lessons mandatory, we do so at the risk of teaching students to ignore their consciences, to silence their objections, and to learn that sensitivity, compassion, personal ethics, and scientific research are mutually exclusive. It is our responsibility as educators to provide our students with the latest in educational technology, but more importantly, to provide them with a safe academic environment in which their sensitivity and compassion are not only accepted, but celebrated, and allowing students to opt out of school dissection lessons is a necessary step to meeting that objective.

Sincerely,
Anthony Sorge