

Dear Honorable Members of the Select Committee on Children,

It is hard to go a day without hearing a new story about bullying. Around the country, kids are skipping classes, skipping school, and killing themselves to avoid their tormentors, or what they perceive, at their young age, to be a lifetime of torment. As educators, we do our best to provide discipline to the perpetrators and support to the victims. We organize awareness-raising assemblies and enforce new rules. But rarely do we look at the deepest roots of this bullying problem, or our culture's complicity in that problem. If we did, we would need to make some difficult decisions about some of our deepest-held beliefs and societal norms.

One of those decisions is the decision you are facing today: whether or not to pass HB12-5184, which would give students the right to opt out of dissection experiments in their high school science classes. On the surface, these two issues—bullying and dissection—could not be more dissimilar. But what is bullying, if not an exercise of one individual's dominance over another, borne out of a lack of empathy, a perception of the "other" as weak, subordinate, inferior? On the dissection table, students are engaged in a similar exercise: they are taught that it is okay—and more than okay, scientifically necessary—to raise animals for the explicit purpose of shipping them to classrooms across the country so students can rip open their flesh and take a look at their insides. Students are taught an important lesson in dominance: that these frogs, fetal pigs, and other individuals are "ours" to use as we see fit. Perhaps more importantly, they are taught an important lesson in empathy, or the lack thereof: that their discomfort, their disgust, their ethical qualms with cutting into these animals are flaws of theirs, are obstacles on the way to the cold, analytical mind required of "serious" scientists. They are taught another lesson in the bizarre cognitive dissonance of our culture: that it is okay, if not necessary, to "care about" others, to "care about" endangered species and the injured birds at the local Audubon Society, and that it is okay, if not necessary to *not* care about certain other individuals.

As a high school teacher, I hear from students every year when the dissections begin. I hear students tell me that they couldn't do the experiment, and had to let their partners do it for them. I hear students tell me, in low, unsure voices, that they felt like dissecting the frog, or fetal pig, or whatever, was somehow "wrong." I have never heard a student tell me they enjoyed the experiment. More importantly, I have never heard a student regale me with the depth of breadth of scientific knowledge they gained from tearing open the

animal and peeking inside. The reality of the situation is that most of these students will not go on to become scientists—and the ones that do will soon realize that the overwhelming majority of medical schools have eliminated these outdated animal-based teaching methods. In an age of computer technology, of internet access and innovative software, it seems absurd to cling to this archaic practice of dissection—absurd and irresponsible, because as we see in our hallways, in our newspapers, in our society, empathy and acts of conscience are hard to come by these days. We need to begin teaching our students that the animals raised as “biological supplies” are not ours to use and cut open to satisfy our intellectual curiosity, that our students need not have to confide their discomfort about dissection in hushed, embarrassed tones, that they should be rewarded for listening to their conscience, for listening to the part of themselves that tells them the frog on their lab table once had a life it wanted to live, a primal drive for life that we share with those animals, and which nothing gives us the right to take away.

I would love for HB12-5184 to ban the practice of dissection once and for all, but I’m all too aware that the inertia of tradition makes this impossible. In the meantime, the very least we can do is provide students with the choice to opt out of these experiments, to listen to their conscience and their innate empathic drive and not have a zero in their teacher’s gradebook as a reward for their compassion. Please support. HB12-5184.

Thank you.

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