

Senate bill would allow student refusal of animal dissection

By **Brianna Rhodes**|AP January 27 at 2:33 PM

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — State Sen. Ronald Young, D-Frederick and Washington counties, this week proposed legislation requiring that public and nonpublic schools allow students the right to refuse to participate in or observe coursework that involves live or dead animals.

Young argued at a hearing Wednesday before the Maryland Senate's Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs committee that alternative coursework or assignments should be available for students who decide not to participate in a dissection or vivisection and as a result, should not be penalized for their decisions by school officials.

Young said the legislation should be passed because it will save money, it would mean fewer animals are killed, and some people are very conscious of other forms of life and don't wish to kill them.

Young also said schools should have a policy to offer alternatives.

"There are over 500 alternative ways to teach dissections and there are much more humane ways to teach," Young said during the hearing.

"Alternate educational methods" include videos, films, models, live observations, among others according to the bill.

“More than 50 studies show that you get better learning using alternative methods than cutting animals,” Young said.

Young explained that there are resources online and rubber frogs that are sold with the parts included that are able to be “dissected” many times.

“I remember in school once, kids were throwing frog legs around,” Young said. “It was more of a joke than a learning experience.”

Of the 24 jurisdictions, 17 have no written policies regarding the issue, and the ones that do have not updated their policy to include newer methods of alternatives that are available, Young said.

A National Anti-Vivisection Society survey found that 50 percent of Maryland teachers polled were unaware of any county policy regarding dissections through their county’s department of education.

The survey also revealed that 60 percent of Maryland students polled did not know whether their school offered alternatives to animal dissection.

Donna Bernstein, a resident of Owings Mills, Maryland, who testified during the hearing Wednesday, said she believes that all four of her children would have benefited from the bill.

She said that the bill gives students the courage to decide whether to participate in dissections.

Bernstein also said it encourages teachers to look at alternatives for the student to have an equal or better experience.

It also supports students who are afraid of being penalized and ridiculed — by other students or by teachers — for choosing not to dissect, Bernstein said.

Bernstein said her child felt that the teacher did not fully respect his decision to opt out.

Bernstein said that the teacher told him he could stand outside the classroom when he said he did not want to participate in a dissection.

The same issue happened with one of her other children, she said. Bernstein said she spoke to administrators for weeks about teachers showing students respect and also providing choices.

Bernstein said she ended up purchasing \$3,000 worth of alternatives for the school.

Studies have shown that these alternatives are much better than the real experience, Bernstein said.

According to PETA's website, the majority of comparative studies show that students who were taught using non-animal methods tested just as well or better than their peers who were taught using animals. The website also mentioned that educators benefited from alternative methods by decreasing cost and time.

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Currently, 18 states allow students to select an alternative to animal dissections, according to the American Anti-Vivisection Society.

School systems from Anne Arundel, Montgomery, and Harford counties, as well as Baltimore City Public Schools, are opposing the bill.

The bill proposes that the State Department of Education should require the board of education in each jurisdiction to send notices to schools about certain policies, terms, and regulations relating to the student's choice in

refusal. The same applies to nonpublic schools.

The bill would take effect on July 1.

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