

**Rep. Sue Mullen’s Moving and Successful Floor Speech on HB 1431: “Parental Bill of Rights”
May 26, 2022. Rep Mullen is a member of the House Education Committee**

Mr. Speaker:

Today, I rise in **opposition to HB 1431, the Parents’ Bill of Rights**, which may seem ironic, given the fact that I am a parent myself.

I believe wholeheartedly in parents taking responsibility for their children’s education and medical care. I also support school districts and healthcare facilities doing everything they can to engage with parents in building relationships built on transparency and trust. But this bill isn’t about building relationships. This bill is about a lack of trust that robs kids of the opportunity to connect with caring, supportive adults at the times in their lives when they may need them the most.

Many of the “rights” outlined in HB 1431 are already law:

the right to enroll a child in public, private school or home school,

the right to review school records,

the right to opt out of certain topics of instruction,

the right to review and object to particular instructional materials,

the right to access state standards,

the right to access services via an individualized education or 504 plan,

the right to enroll in Title I or Medicaid services,

the right to access free or reduced lunch,

All of these provisions are already defined and defended under state and federal statute, so they are hardly “rights” that a parent would need to fight for.

In addition, there are some “rights” in this bill that don’t seem right at all.

HB 1431 would require schools to track and notify parents every time a student changed their extra curricular activities or joined a club, like Theater, or Destination Imagination, or The Gay Straight Alliance. Schools would be required to report all discipline imposed by school authorities without defining either discipline or school authority. Does this mean that if chatty seventh grade Susie needs to have her seat changed, a call will be made to home? What if active Alan throws a Tater Tot in the cafeteria? Is Mr. Vice Principal expected to call mom after he requires Al to clean up the floor around the table?

I spent 12 years as a fifth grade teacher and I can assure you that dealing with student discipline is a MAJOR portion of every day. What will happen when teachers have fifteen phone calls to make at the end of the day? I can guess that fewer teachers will report loving their jobs, and loving your job is exactly what MAKES a great teacher. And how about the conversations that kids have with the principal or assistant that are meant to redirect or inspire them? Our administrators are well loved by the students. As a teacher, I would frequently ask one of them to intervene. Who’s making THAT call? How long will it be before the taxpayer is on the hook for the additional staff that it takes to clear the daily log jam?

The most meaningful professional work I did was as a school counselor. For 27 years I had the privilege of assisting students and families during the most difficult times of their lives. I have held students as they cried over the loss of a parent. I have held parents who lost children to illness, to drugs and to depression. My door was always open and my office was a refuge for kids and adults who needed a listening ear and a compassionate heart to navigate the challenges that come to all of us,

sooner or later. As I stand here today, I am the voice of EVERY dedicated school counselor. Why would you want to silence me?

Sometimes, advocating for a student meant taking on the school. The teacher really WAS mean. The current plan just wasn't working. The student couldn't get their homework done because nobody at home could help. If you think I am kidding, try doing your kid's homework and see how well you do.

Sometimes I needed to address the parents. He's worried about your drinking. The divorce has her totally distracted. Maybe something is interfering with his learning. Did either of you ever have trouble with school?

Sometimes, I needed to confront the student. Well, what are you doing if you're NOT doing your homework? What did you EXPECT would happen if you waited until the day before it was due? What made you think THAT was an opinion you should share?

Like every dedicated school counselor, I based my work on honesty and compassion. Why would you want to silence me?

During my career, I had multiple students disclose to me that they had been sexually abused. Another that his mother was being assaulted. That a sibling was in trouble with the law. That a parent was going to jail. That they had tried to kill themselves because they didn't know what else to do.

Some of these disclosures came relatively quickly, but most of them were the result of a tested relationship. Victimized kids need time. Kids with a secret are frequently scared to death that speaking the truth will result in something even more horrifying than the reality of what they're living. If that school counselor is the difference between Hell or survival, why would you want to silence them?

But, we already know all of this. NH has been studying Adverse Childhood Experiences for decades now. We know that the single most protective factor in building resilient kids is engaging them in healthy relationships, and we know that schools are the ideal place to lay the foundation of trust that kids need to thrive.

HB 1431 requires school counselors like me to notify parents if students have a dress code violation. Any behavior management or intervention must also be reported. Discussions about gender identity or expression must be disclosed, whether the student is ready to have the conversation or not, because "inadvertently or purposefully withheld" information is subject to disciplinary action. "Inadvertently?" Doesn't that mean accidentally or without intention? In addition, parents may seek monetary damages and court costs, making the desire for collaboration and an effort to forge a home school partnership seem antique, at best.

According to the GLAD Legal Advocates and Defenders Office, one in four LGBTQ youth attempted suicide in 2021. The Trevor Project reports that 60% of LGBTQ youth who wanted mental health care in the past year were unable to get it, 73% experienced symptoms of anxiety and 58% suffered from depression. Being LGBTQ is one of the leading causes of homelessness among teens in America, and that's not because everyone's news is being greeted with open arms.

Helping students communicate with their parents about their sexuality is a good thing. Forcing school personnel to out their students to parents before anyone is ready for an open, honest, and sometimes tough conversation, is not.

We have the opportunity to help NH's students and their families by opposing this bill. We can deliver the message that living in NH means that we accept and value you unconditionally, and that we know that we are gambling with kids lives, if we don't.

Please vote no on HB 1431 by pushing the red button.