

Issue: Education

How Virginia Republicans Block Educational Reforms

Summary

Since 2014, Rep. Steve Landes (R-HD25) has been the chair of the House Education Committee in the Virginia General Assembly. He hasn't been particularly willing to let bills come to a vote in his tenure. This mirrors the operations of the Appropriations and Finance Committees, both of which have reviewed bills that could have greatly improved the educational system of the Commonwealth—and then let them die. This isn't a story about one party passing harmful legislation, this is about one party blocking much needed legislation.

A Session of Mismanagement

Top House Bills Killed in 2018

The House Education Committee sees a variety of bills while in session, ranging from curriculum to teacher responsibilities. In the 2018 legislative session, Democrats proposed bills to improve conditions for students, teachers, and working parents. These included:

- **HB 109**, introduced by Karrie Delaney (D-HD67), co-patroned by Wendy Gooditis (D-HD10) and Elizabeth Guzman (D-HD31). Would have required all kindergartens to expand options for full-day kindergarten, improving childrens' social skills and allowing working parents to work full days. **Died in House Education Committee**
- **HB 168**, introduced by Kathleen Murphy (D-HD34) and supported by Mark Keam (D-HD35). It required science laboratories in grades 6-12 to be no larger than 24 students, improving lab safety and quality of instruction from an otherwise overwhelmed teacher. **Died in House Education Committee**
- **HB 252** and **HB 253**, both introduced by Elizabeth Guzman (D-HD31), the former supported by Danica Roem (D-13). It required school boards to employ at least one mental health counsellor per 250 students and to limit the maximum caseload to five students for each full-time special education aide. These would have improved student relations, mental health, learning ability, and reduced the stress placed on teachers untrained in mental health or special education needs. **Both died in House Education Committee**
- **HB 980**, introduced by Debra Rodman (D-HD73). This bill would have reduced the number of standardized tests to the minimum number of tests required by the federal government. This would eliminate unnecessary tests that would otherwise interrupt curriculums and increase stress for both students and teachers. **Died in House Education Committee**
- **HB 1434**, introduced by Mark Keam (D-HD35) and supported by State Senator Jennifer Boysko (D-SD33). It required school boards to make tampons and pads available at all times at no cost to the students in every public school bathroom for grades 6-12, saying "menstrual supplies are a health care necessity that cannot be easily foregone or substituted," comparing

them to soap and toilet paper, supplies that are federally regulated. This would have decreased risk of infection for menstruating individuals who may overuse products due to lack of access to fresh supplies, decreased amount of class time missed for students navigating a situation where they don't have the supplies they need and have to procure them to avoid stained clothing, and potentially decrease the stigma regarding menstruation in the school environment. **Died in House Education Committee**

- **HB 946**, introduced by Rob Bell (R-HD58), with support from four Republican colleagues. Would have prohibited public schools from joining interscholastic programs that do not allow homeschooled students to participate in activities. It would have increased interscholastic interactions for otherwise isolated students receiving home instruction. This bill is an example of the fact that both sides have suffered from this legislative bottleneck. **Died in House Education Committee**

The Interesting Case of School Nurses

During the 2018 legislative session, one bill showed up again and again, no fewer than four times, introduced by four different legislators from both the Republican and Democratic sides of the aisle. They were numbered House Bills 791, 1046, 1254, and Senate Bill 366. As the SB 366 was the ultimate iteration, it will be referred to as SB 366 from now on.

SB 366 simply stated that school nurses should no longer be considered among student support positions, and instead requires each local school board to employ at least one full-time equivalent school nurse for every school or per 550 students (HB 1254 amended this to per 1,000 students with no success) in grades K-12. Each proposal died in the House Education Committee, save SB 366, which was continued to 2019 in the Senate Health and Education Committee. It died there.

Why does this one bill keep failing? And why have versions of this bill shown up for years? In 2017, House Bill 1757 (an earlier attempt) was unanimously voted down in the House Appropriations Committee, with the committee citing "too many mandates and the costs on local school divisions."¹ This occurred despite huge support in the healthcare community and many Virginia school districts having fewer nurses than schools. Another factor may be the Fiscal Impact Statement of the bill. The statement for SB366 estimated an additional \$4.0 million cost to the state in the fiscal year of 2019 had the bill passed. It added that 2018's SB 366 was cheaper than 2018's HB 1046, since the wording HB 1046 would have required both one nurse per school *and* one nurse per 550 students, as opposed to SB 366's one nurse per school *or* one nurse per 550 students. Despite bipartisan support and an undeniable need for more nurses, this bill again died in committee. No new iterations have shown up in the 2019 legislative session thus far.

Family Life Education Curricula

Designed to inform students of important and often under-acknowledged social issues, the Family Life curriculum includes lessons on family relations, self-esteem, personal hygiene, and sex education. Though educational and progressive in areas regarding discrimination, substance abuse, and children's rights, the lessons are lacking in proper sexual education, instead focusing on abstinence-only training and methods of saying "no" to premarital sex, an educational method that has been proven not to prevent teenage sexual activity, and instead leaves students with a dangerous lack of information². Democrats worked to expand the Family Life curriculum in the 2018 legislative session with mixed results due to Republican opposition. They were able to pass two bills with a signature from the governor:

- **HB 45**, introduced by Eileen Filler-Corn (D–HD41) with support from Dickie Bell (R–HD20). Requires that the Family Life Curriculum includes age-appropriate information regarding privacy and personal boundaries.
- **SB 101**, introduced by State Senator Jennifer McClellan (D–SD9) with support from Kaye Kory (D–HD38). Requires high schools to include evidence-based programs on prevention, recognition, and awareness of child abuse, abduction, and sexual exploitation. **Incorporated SB 425, SB 789, and SB 843**, regarding child sexual abuse, sexually explicit communications and images, and medically accurate information regarding human reproduction, respectively

It's also important to look at the bills regarding Family Life Education that failed to pass. Four of the five proposed House bills on the topic died in the House Education Committee:

- **HB 44**, introduced by Eileen Filler-Corn (D–HD41) with support from Dickie Bell (R–HD20). It would have required high schools to include evidence-based programs on the law and meaning of consent, updating current laws that allow such elements to be taught but aren't required. Candid conversations on what consent truly means have been shown to be beneficial to students who are or may one day become sexually active.
- **HB 159**, introduced by Sam Rasoul (D–HD11), with support from six fellow Democratic delegates. It would have required local school boards to implement the family education curriculum with medically accurate and age-appropriate information, including information about the etiology, prevention, and effects of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).
- **HB 1168**, introduced by Dave LaRock (R–HD33) with support from Brenda Pogge (R–HD96). It would have prohibited any student from participating in family life education without the written consent of their parents, a requirement that deters attendance.
- **HB 1123**, introduced by Debra Rodman (D–HD73) with support from Eileen Filler-Corn (D–HD41). It would have required the family learning curriculum to include standards for teaching the prevention, recognition, and awareness of child abduction, abuse, sexual exploitation, and sexual abuse.

As stated by a particularly articulate high schooler in a Virginia public school, “Teaching students about contraceptives and how to know if they have an STD does not mean that they will think they can or should be going out and having sex now; it means that they can be well prepared when the time does come around.”³

Who Can We Pressure to do Better?

Learn what committees your local Delegate and State Senator are on. If they are a member of the House Education, Appropriations, or Finance Committees, or Senate Education & Health, tell them your values. They are there to serve their constituents above anyone else.

¹ https://www.richmond.com/news/local/education/districts/va-house-bill-to-put-more-nurses-in-schools-fails/article_57f65081-f884-517c-9847-42e3b69a9037.html

² <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/08/23/545289168/abstinence-education-is-ineffective-and-unethical-report-argues>

³ <https://thsgazette.com/1991/features/how-the-virginia-sex-ed-curriculum-hurts-students/>

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