



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

**TESTIMONY ON SENATE BILL 237:
HUMAN GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT
Presented to the Senate Committee on Education
By Barbara Sella, Associate Director
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 237, the “Strong Communities...Healthy Kids Act.” The Wisconsin Catholic Conference strongly supports this bill because it is a balanced, flexible, and all-inclusive approach to the issue of sex education in public schools.

SB 237 is an improvement over current law first because it strengthens local control. Under current law, a school district can only offer comprehensive sex education or nothing at all. SB 237 gives school districts the option of offering 1) comprehensive sex education, 2) abstinence-based sex education, 3) both comprehensive and abstinence-based education, or 4) no instruction. SB 237 also gives school districts the option of instructing pupils in single-sex courses. Finally, it strengthens local control by revising the composition of the ad hoc advisory committee to ensure that it truly reflects the wishes of the community.

Second, SB 237 increases parental involvement. Parents are the first and primary educators of their children. Again and again, research demonstrates that when parents know what their children are learning and doing, when they communicate openly, impart their values, and set meaningful boundaries, their children are less likely to engage in risky behavior of all kinds. SB 237 gives parents more choices about how they wish to see their children educated, thereby empowering and encouraging them to become more, not less, involved in their children’s lives.

Third, the subjects SB 237 recommends are more inclusive than the current law because they include the essential topics of prenatal development, the nature and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, adoption, prenatal and postnatal care, personal responsibility, and the benefits of marriage. The bill recommends teaching children not simply about the benefits of abstinence, but also about the skills they will need if they choose abstinence. At the same time, the bill retains important topics in the current law, such as prevention of bullying, resources for survivors of sexual abuse and assault, criminal penalties, and sex offender registration.

Fourth, SB 237 is fiscally responsible because it broadens the funding available to school districts by requiring the Department of Public Instruction to apply for all federal funding intended for education on all the topics listed in the bill. As a state, we need to make sure that we obtain all the financial resources available so we can provide our children the very best instruction possible.

Fifth, SB 237 fosters accountability by prohibiting volunteers from outside groups to teach the HGD curriculum. Unlike outside volunteers, teachers are ultimately accountable to parents and school boards for the education pupils receive in their classroom. We trust that teachers have the training necessary to teach in this sensitive area and that they will be responsive to community standards and parent concerns.

What we teach our children about sexuality today will help determine the kind of society we will live in tomorrow. It is not enough to give children information on staying safe and healthy; they also need formation and guidance. The best sex education is not just about avoiding pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. The best education teaches children to develop their unique character and potential, to increase their self-worth and self-restraint, and to grow in their capacity for love and responsibility. Intelligent and compassionate instruction helps students learn from past mistakes and change potentially damaging behavior.

The Catholic Church teaches that abstinence-based instruction is the best way to fulfill this educational mission. Others maintain that comprehensive sex education and expanding access to contraception is the surest way to achieve this goal. The important thing is that rather than mandating a uniform approach for all sex education programs across the state as current law does, lawmakers should focus their efforts on empowering parents, pupils, educators, and other interested community members, because strong communities are essential to raising healthy kids.

For all these reasons, the WCC urges you to support this measured, tolerant, and inclusive legislation. We believe it is a responsible approach that will stand the test of time.

Thank you.