

STUDENT CHOICE IN BIOLOGY EDUCATION: *A Policy Guide*



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

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STUDENT CHOICE POLICIES PROVIDE all students with the chance to enjoy science and express their enthusiasm for biology, whatever their ethical beliefs. This brochure provides guidance on how to construct a student choice policy that will work for your school.

WHY CREATE A STUDENT CHOICE POLICY FOR YOUR SCHOOL?

Student choice policies permit students to choose study methods in biology that do not involve the harming or killing of animals. Student choice allows all students—regardless of ethical or religious beliefs—access to a high-quality biology education by offering alternatives to animal exercises with which they disagree.

■ Many students have genuine objections to dissection and live animal exercises.

Students' objections are often motivated by a deeply held belief in the value of life or by concern over inhumane husbandry or killing practices. Many of the approximately six million vertebrate animals killed each year for dissection in U.S. schools suffer prior to death.

■ Student choice protects freedom of ethical and religious belief.

In many cases throughout the United States, students have had to resort to legal action to ensure a biology education that does not compromise their ethical or religious beliefs. Freedom of ethical and religious belief has been supported by law in each of these cases, sometimes with substantial monetary awards. Student choice policies prevent such adversarial situations.

■ Students who choose alternatives receive an equivalent education.

More than 20 published scientific research studies collectively show that students who use alternatives learn anatomy and physiology as well as *or better than* students who use animals. The quality of interactive biology education resources has increased enormously in recent years.

■ Science teachers support student choice.

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) surveyed participants at the 20th annual National Science Teachers Association convention and found that the majority of high school teachers supported student choice in dissection. Another HSUS survey of U.S. biology teachers found that 66 percent of respondents supported student choice.

■ Alternatives are widely available.

The HSUS Humane Education Loan Program (HELP) offers free loans of biology teaching resources like CD-ROMs, videotapes, and models so teachers can try the latest technology in their lessons. With minimal effort, teachers can find resources that suit their lesson plans and fit their styles of teaching. The HSUS Biological Science Consultancy Service, run by trained scientists, can help teachers identify the resources they need quickly and efficiently.

Student choice policies prevent potentially damaging conflicts from arising over biology education and assist school administration officials, teachers, and students in achieving the best outcome.

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IT'S THE LAW

In many states—including Florida, California, Pennsylvania, New York, Rhode Island, Illinois, Virginia, Oregon, and New Jersey—student choice in biology education is mandated by law. Some laws simply require that students

be allowed to choose not to dissect. In other states, like Maine, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New Mexico, resolutions and education policies require teachers to have knowledge of nondissection teaching methods or to inform students of their right to choose in advance. Up-to-date information on this legislation can be found at humanesociety.org/dissection_alternatives. If your state has a law, a school board may create a policy to inform students of that law; alternatively, the school board might augment the state law with other elements of policy outlined below. If your state does not have a student choice law, the development of a local school board policy is of even greater importance.

WHAT SHOULD THE STUDENT CHOICE POLICY INCLUDE?

Student choice policies can be worded in many different ways, covering information about parental consent, modes of academic assessment, and teacher responsibility for informing students of their right to choose. The policies, however, do not have to be complex. Here are the elements of a good student choice policy.

■ What type of choice?

Student choice does not mean that students can opt out of doing their schoolwork; they are simply choosing between methods of instruction.

Students may choose not to perform vivisection, dissection, or other exercises on animals that may cause the animals pain, distress, injury, death, or other harm. An alternative educational exercise will be made available to students who do not perform the animal-based activity.

■ To whom does the policy apply?

The policy should designate which schools and/or grades are covered.

This policy applies to all students at public schools in ABC County/the state.

■ Which animals are included?

Students with ethical concerns for the preservation of life are likely to apply this perspective consistently to all sentient species, so the policy should apply to all animals.

This policy includes exercises involving all animals in the kingdom Animalia, including body parts of these animals and the living embryos of these species (e.g., unhatched chicks).



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■ Which exercises?

Nonharmful observational studies of wild or domestic animal behavior will not cause concern to students and are valuable exercises in functional anatomy and behavior. Those that cause harm or involve dead animals should be covered by the student choice policy, as should any form of dissection, vivisection, or exercises that may cause pain or distress to animals.

Students may choose not to perform any activity that involves dissection or vivisection of any animal in the kingdom Animalia or to perform educational exercises or experiments that may cause harm or distress to the subject animals.

■ What constitutes an alternative exercise?

Alternative exercises should not require students to participate in any way in dissection activities or harmful experimentation.

Asking students to observe others performing dissection, or letting students leave during the activity but requiring them to return to study the dissected animals, are not appropriate alternatives for those with ethical concerns for the value of animal life. The policy should ensure that students are not involved with activities to which they object.

Students who choose not to participate in these activities will not be required to observe the dissection exercise or experimental activity or to participate in studies of previously dissected animals.



■ How will those not performing dissection be taught?

Motivated students learn well by using their textbooks, but for interactive, hands-on investigative experiences, a range of CD-ROMs and other alternative resources are available for all dissection exercises (visit humanesociety.org/dissection_alternatives for information on our free HELP resource program). The policy should ensure that all students have the same learning opportunities. *Students who choose not to perform the specified activity will be provided with an alternative learning resource of a similar level of academic difficulty as the animal-based activity.*

■ How will students be assessed?

Students who choose not to participate in dissection or other specified animal exercises should also not be assessed using dissected animals, as this would discriminate against their ethical and religious beliefs and academically penalize those who do not perform the animal-based activity.

Student assessment will not utilize dissection or vivisection or activities that may cause harm or distress to subject animals. All students will receive a test of a similar level of difficulty, whatever method of instruction is used.

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■ How will teachers have the resources to teach all students?

Many student choice policies require teachers to familiarize themselves with nondissection teaching methods like interactive CD-ROMs to ensure that all students get the same quality of teaching.



The HSUS helps teachers achieve this by offering a free consultancy service to identify the best resources or teaching methods. The HSUS HELP lets teachers try the resources for free (visit humansociety.org/dissection_alternatives for more information). Cost comparisons also show that nondissection teaching resources are often cheaper in the long term, as they can be used repeatedly. *Teachers will familiarize themselves with alternative resources, such as computer simulations, appropriate to the course of instruction in which they are engaged.*

■ How will students know about the policy?

To prepare appropriate teaching resources, prevent costly waste, and ensure that students know they can choose not to perform dissection, vivisection, or other exercises that are harmful to animals, the policy should clearly state that students are to be informed in advance of any of these activities.

Students will be informed in writing and verbally of any animal-based laboratory class at least three weeks prior to the date of the class. Students will also be informed of the school board policy at the time of the laboratory class.

■ When can students choose not to perform dissection?

Advance notice of dissection classes will enable students to voice their choices early; however, some students may wait until the class to summon the courage to speak up or only make up their minds when confronted with the exercise. It is therefore important that students have the option to choose not to dissect, even on the day of the exercise. Accordingly, students *should not* be required to submit their concerns by a specific date prior to the exercise.

■ Should the policy require written parental consent?

Parental consent may ensure that the parent is comfortable with the student's choice and that the student is serious. However, the student may have strongly held ethical or religious beliefs that are not shared by the parent or the student may for other reasons be unable to obtain consent. The student's own ethical values should have primary consideration. Many student choice policies therefore do not require parental consent, particularly when the policy specifically states that equivalent quality of teaching methods will be used, with or without dissection.



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SAMPLE STUDENT CHOICE POLICY

All the elements discussed above are represented in the sample student choice policy shown below. The wording reflects the intent of the range of student choice policies that have been adopted across the United States.

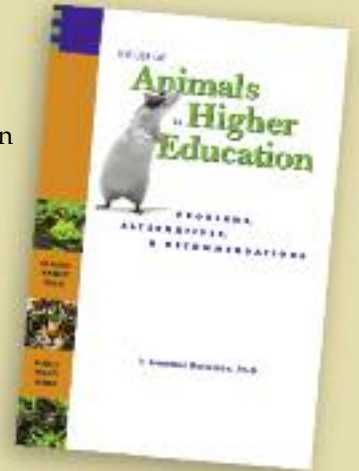
- Students at public schools in ABC County may choose not to perform vivisection, dissection, or educational or experimental exercises on animals that may cause the animals pain, distress, injury, death, or other harm.
- This policy includes exercises involving all animals in the kingdom Animalia, including body parts of these animals and the living embryos of these species (e.g., unhatched chicks).
- Students who choose not to perform the specified activity will be provided with an alternative educational exercise of a similar level of academic difficulty as the animal-based activity.
- Students who choose not to participate in dissection, vivisection, or other animal-related activities will not be required to observe the exercise or to participate in studies of previously dissected or vivisected animals.
- Student assessment will not utilize dissection or vivisection or activities that may cause harm or distress to subject animals. All students will receive a test of a similar level of difficulty, whatever method of instruction is used.
- Teachers will familiarize themselves with alternative resources, such as computer simulations, appropriate to the course of instruction in which they are engaged.

- Students will be informed in writing and verbally of any animal-based laboratory class at least three weeks prior to the date of the class. Students will also be informed of the school board policy at the time of the laboratory class.

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR ADVICE

For more information on dissection and animal use in the classroom, consult *The Use of Animals in Higher Education: Problems, Alternatives, and Recommendations* by Jonathan Balcombe,

Ph.D. This book is available free online at humanesociety.org/animals_in_education_book or can be ordered for \$19.95* (plus \$3.00 per copy for shipping and handling) from Animal Research Issues, The HSUS, 2100 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037. For wholesale and retail inquiries, e-mail dsalem@humanesociety.org.



To access our free Biological Science Consultancy Service or HELP, or for more advice on student choice policy development, call 301-721-6439 or e-mail ari@humanesociety.org.

*Residents of these states should add applicable sales tax: CA (7.25%), CT (6%), DC (5.75%), FL (6%), IL (6.25%), MD (5%), OH (5%).

