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February 27, 2022

Re: "Parents' Bill of Rights" proposed legislation (S.F. 2666, S.F. 2575, S.F. 2909, S.F. 2729)

Dear Senators,

What do parents want?

In many recent conversations about education, many have asked the question "what do parents want?" Minnesota PTA is in a unique position to share information on how the proposed "Parents' Bill of Rights" bills do – or do not – address the perspectives of Minnesota parents.

Since 1922, the Minnesota PTA – "Parent-Teacher-Association" - has supported parents, students, and educators across the state. We currently have over 200 local units in Minnesota with over 4,000 members representing all forms of schools, including rural, suburban, urban, district, and charter. The Minnesota PTA is a state congress of the National PTA, the oldest and largest volunteer child advocacy organization in the nation, with over 20,000 local units in all 50 states.

The mission of the PTA is to make every child's potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children. What are we hearing from our Minnesota PTA members?

- Minnesota parents expect that their children will learn in a school that welcomes all students; that provides a high quality education; and that engages with and is accountable to all parents and families.
- Learning during the pandemic provided parents and families new ways to see their children's education up close and personal and to be immersed in it in a way they never were before.
- Minnesota PTA members are using the power of their voices to speak up to hold our schools and districts and state and Federal decision-makers accountable for meeting our expectations.
- Parents and families want our public schools to have the resources they need to meet the individual needs of our diverse students across the state.

Minnesota PTA cannot support any of the proposed "Parents' Bill of Rights" legislation in their current forms.

Senate Files 2909 and 2575 provide no better language than what already exists in Minnesota law to arm parents with information and remedies regarding their child's education and the power to act on making education better for all students. In a review of existing Minnesota law we found more than 44 existing provisions that:

- Require parents and families have access to review the content of instructional materials and, if they object, to make reasonable arrangements for alternative instruction
- Require parent participation in developing their individual student's education plans
- Require specific notices to parents
- Require parent and family members on district and school advisory committees
- Required district and school plans for parent and family engagement
- Delineate the rights of parents and families at hearings and mediation regarding their children

Model policies that reflect these laws and guide their implementation in Minnesota districts and schools mention these requirements more than 33 times. There is no evidence that Senate Files 2909 and 2575 would do anything to improve the implementation of the multiple provisions that already exist. Many of our Minnesota PTA members are actively engaged in these existing pathways and have provided important perspectives in schools and districts across the state. Nothing should divert district, school and parent focus away from existing efforts to implement these important existing opportunities for parent engagement, empowerment and advocacy.

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Minnesota PTA is concerned with the additional burdens Senate File 2666 puts on districts and teachers to maintain class syllabi. PTAs everywhere champion and nurture trusting parent-teacher partnerships. Our parent members treasure the continuous and ongoing two-way communication with their children’s teachers regarding curriculum and instruction, their child’s individual progress, and how they as parents can support their children’s learning at home to support their success at school.

We feel that Senate File 2666 diverts focus from growing each parent-teacher partnership to monitoring the update status of a syllabus. We strongly believe in the “T” in “PTA” – the highly trained and professional educators rooted in their knowledge of curriculum, child development and what is happening daily in their classrooms. Educators evaluate student learning needs every day, and their strategies for meeting those needs change on a day to day (sometimes hour to hour!) basis. Parents want teachers to be responsive to their children in real time - an annual syllabus removes that flexibility and introduces a rigidity that does not reflect the reality of today’s teaching and learning environment.

Minnesota PTA recognizes that communication between parents and school boards is central to continuous feedback and improvement of our public schools. Therefore, we cannot support the language of Senate File 2729 unless it includes a provision that allows a school board to collect the name, address, email and phone number of speakers at school board meetings. That contact information does not have to be disclosed publicly at the meeting but must be available to the school board to contact the speaker with information, answers to questions or follow-up steps after the meeting.

What legislation could the Minnesota PTA support?

Our personal experience as parents reinforces research findings that parent and family engagement is a key input to the formula that drives student success in school. As Minnesota schools work to do better for our Black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, LBGQTQIA+, English Learner and Special Education students, opportunities for all families to share their experiences in their children’s schools will inform the development of impactful proposals and programs.

Senate File 2822 and its companion bill House File 3401 contains language that supports “family engagement initiatives that involve families in their students’ academic life and success and improve relations between home and school.” The language in these bills reinforces that school districts must refocus their efforts to actively recruit parents and families from Minnesota’s diverse communities to participate in district planning, and must work to accommodate parent and family schedules and barriers to participation to ensure that they can be present when decisions are made. We urge Senators to give this bill a hearing and continue consideration of legislative language that welcomes, includes and respects diverse parent and family perspectives at all the tables where decisions about our children are being made.

Finally, all parents want our public schools to have the resources necessary to support every child’s success in school. Consistency and predictability in revenues would provide a more solid foundation for our districts and schools to create stable budgets that meet the changing learning needs of students. Minnesota PTA urges Senators to consider the opportunity the \$7.7 billion surplus provides to address the per-pupil funding that has not kept up with inflation since 2003 and the special education cross subsidy that will cost districts \$807 million by FY 2025. We urge Senators to take action to fully fund our public schools, add an automatic inflation component to the general education funding formula, and close the special education cross subsidy.

What do parents want? Our PTA motto is “Every Child, One Voice.” We use our parent voice to speak up for the success of every child in the state of Minnesota, and we hope all Senators will join us in this effort.

Thank you for your consideration.

Amy Nelson
President, Minnesota PTA

Cathy Nathan
Advocacy Commissioner, Minnesota PTA