

The Humane Classroom Act

The light struggled to break through the murky green waters, but what little did illuminated the fish swimming in the tank. When the bell rang, dismissing the first day of my environmental science class in August 2018, my concern for the fish compelled me to stay to ask questions. My teacher explained that the neglected tank was her attempt to create a sustainable ecosystem with live fish that would not require food, a filter, or care. With my teacher's assurance that all was going as planned, I left with my worries temporarily eased, but throughout that week, as the tank loomed from the back of the room, my fears trickled back. Wondering if the fish really were safe, I felt more and more guilty for not being able to press the issue with my teacher, whose judgment and authority I was afraid to challenge. But, by the end of the week, I could ignore the problem no longer, as it distracted me for most of the period, so I stayed behind again to ask more questions.

I was horrified to find out that, after being thrown into a tank with dirty creek water and given no guarantee of survival, the fish had been abandoned at school over the summer. Had the ecosystem collapsed, they would have starved, suffocated, or died from ammonia poisoning. Now, as part of a class project, those that survived would be placed into plastic water bottles for a month and experimented on again. In a class I took to learn about caring for Earth and its inhabitants, I found a complete disregard for the well-being of animals. Wondering if I was alone in my moral qualms, I spent much of that day talking to my classmates, hoping I was not the only one concerned. When I shared the story of the fish, and their planned fate, the shocked faces of my peers mirrored my own.

The following week, I convinced my teacher to forgo the experiment, test the tank's water quality more regularly, and allow me to care for the fish when school is not in session.

The Humane Classroom Act

Though I had thought the issue resolved, after talking to friends from other school districts, I was saddened to realize that the problem was much bigger than my class; there were animals suffering and dying for the sake of science experiments in schools across the nation. There had to be a way to address this on a broader scale.

So, I worked with an animal rights lobbyist and an attorney to draft the Humane Classroom Act, which would ban the use of live vertebrates in classrooms, ending the needless experiments that harm countless animals each year and replacing them with modern alternatives. The following is an excerpt from the draft legislation:

Sec. 1. Policy.

- (a) Vertebrates are capable of experiencing pain and suffering.
- (b) Existing law allows experiments where the injury and death of vertebrates is a probable outcome, thus resulting in animal suffering. This works at cross purposes with the goal of state law to “*impress upon the minds of the pupils... the humane treatment of living creatures*” (Educ. Code §233.5).
- (c) Even though they have a right to object, students of conscience who do not want to harm animals are not always told they have such a right and even when they are told, do not exercise the right due to fear of confronting or disappointing teachers who they see as authority figures and fear of humiliation among their peers. As such, students who harm animals when they don’t want to are themselves harmed (Balcombe).
- (d) Students and animals at both public and private schools deserve to be protected.

The Humane Classroom Act

(e) Canadian and American medical schools no longer use live animals in classrooms and consider it an antiquated and ineffective means of education (“Animal,” 2017).

Section 2. Provision.

(a) The use of live vertebrates in any public or private elementary and high schools or in public or private elementary and high school school-sponsored activities and classes held elsewhere than on school premises is prohibited.

Within a few weeks, in September, I was riding up the elevator to our State Senator Nancy Skinner’s office, suited up and ready to explain why the bill deserves to be sponsored. But, after months of waiting to hear whether or not the bill was being considered by Skinner’s office, I met with Assemblymember Ash Kalra in April 2019, who agreed to help with the bill.

As I left the Assemblymember’s office, knowing that the bill may someday become reality, I realized that I — just a student — had set something much greater than myself into motion — something that could save animals, improve education throughout California, and set a precedent for the world to follow. By participating in the political system that affects millions, I gained a new appreciation for the country into which I was born. Only about half of all people live in a democracy, and being fortunate enough to have this luxury compels me to improve our world by accepting my civic duty and making the most of my power as a citizen. Although the Humane Classroom Act is still in its infancy, and though the world may sometimes be a chaotic and troubled place, if we build and maintain a society in which impassioned individuals have the

The Humane Classroom Act

opportunity to advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves — animals especially — we will someday realize our full potential.

The Humane Classroom Act



Figure 1. Tank from the environmental science class. These fish were left without care over the summer, after being experimented on during the school year.



Figure 2. Top view of fish tank.

The Humane Classroom Act



Figure 3. Inside the Elihu M. Harris State Office Building in Oakland, California after visiting Sen. Skinner's office.

The Humane Classroom Act

Citations:

“Animal Laboratories Banned from Medical Student Education.” *Michelson Medical Research*

Foundation, 6 Oct. 2017,

michelsonmedical.org/2017/05/10/animal-laboratories-ban-medical-education/.

Education Code 233.5 California Legislative Information,

http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=EDC§ionNum=233.5.

(last visited Sep 5, 2018)

Jonathan Balcombe, *The Use of Animals in Higher Education* (Humane Society Press)