

RALPH RIVERA'S TESTIMONY ON THE LGBT HISTORY BILL
BEFORE THE ILLINOIS HOUSE EDUCATION CURRICULUM COMMITTEE
ON FEBRUARY 6, 2019.

House Bill 246, now law, would require all public school students Kindergarten through 12th grade, to study U.S. history with affirming views of the roles and contributions of transgenders, bi-sexuals and "gay and lesbians" even though this would not be respectful of students and their mothers and fathers who have religious beliefs against this behavior. Additionally, the new law does not allow for parents and students to opt-out of this curriculum. A majority of committee members didn't care about the religious students' and parents' concerns.

Transcribed Excerpts (from official committee audio) of Ralph Rivera's testimony on HB 246, from Illinois House Education Curriculum Committee hearing on February 6, 2019

(Chair recognizes Mr. Rivera for oral testimony)

Chair:

So, I believe that Mr. Rivera you're here for oral testimony? OK.

Mr. Rivera:

My name's Ralph Rivera.... In our opposition to House Bill 246, first I want to state that I hope [we're] all in agreement that we should respect all persons. In school and work here, and in the General Assembly, and we do this over time. We are respectful. We may disagree on legislation, but at the end of the day we want to be respectful of everyone.

Our concern, though, is there are students in the public schools, many who have a different view, a different religious, for them a religious view, their mothers and fathers, their church, their synagogue, their mosque, have a different view on this. And this is a mandate for schools, and therefore a mandate on those students, to learn something that is against their religious views. The key thing also is that there's no opt-out in this bill. So a student, or parents, who say, we have this from time to time, where a

student or parent say, I would not like to have a program for that student. There's no such opt-out for that.

Additionally, this bill amends the section or statute in the School Code that deals with textbook block grant programs, and it says "all textbooks within those programs must deal with the roles and contributions, etc." So that's not just history, it's math, science, literature, all of that. And textbooks defined in the statute is not just hard copy, but software, manuals, etc. Everything.

And I'm not sure you know the history of this, and I'm kind of confused by this, but the textbook block grant program has not been funded for about seven or eight years. But when it was funded, it made this open to public schools and non-public schools. And many of the non-public schools are religious schools. So, if someday this can be funded by this General Assembly, you're saying to the non-public schools there could be a problem. They have to have all their textbooks going something against their particular religious faith.

So, I'm not sure why that section was picked, but that is a concern that we have. So let me leave it there, and those are the concerns that we have.

Chair:

Thank you, Mr. Rivera.

(Chair recognizes Representative Willis)

Representative Willis:

Thank you. Mr. Rivera, I guess I have a question on how just informing people that there are other people in the world that are like them that are lesbians, or gay, or transgender, or questioning, can be an immoral thing. It's not a how-to manual. It's not stating that you should be gay or you shouldn't be gay. It's just recognizing that there are all different types of people in the world, and that this is just something that we should all recognize.

I think Representative Moeller's done a wonderful job in leaving flexibility into how it, the curriculum itself, is taught. I think also the fact that we're looking at all textbooks because there are people from the LGBT community that have contributed in the sciences, have contributed in math, have contributed in literature, and just recognizing that that is part of what made that person whole, should not be anything that has any moral issues to anybody of just recognizing that that is that person. And I guess that is where I'm really hung up on that as your argument, and why we shouldn't do this. I would like to hear your response on this.

Mr. Rivera:

Basically, this is K through 12. So, you have kindergartners through 12th. And they're impressionable, and if you're doing a positive role and contribution, can that confuse them as to saying this is something that is a positive thing, where in their particular faith that would not be a positive behavior? That's the concern we have.

Representative Willis:

But we oftentimes have same-sex couples that have adopted children, or have children, and they recognize that they have two moms, or two dads, and that doesn't seem to confuse them at kindergarten or in preschool. And I think that it'd be more detrimental, and would certainly hit into the mental health issue, if for some reason we're feeling that that family's not a true family, and not right, and I can see that as a much more pressing influence that would be negative than whatever negativity that you could see in this. I don't expect a response from you on this. Thank you, Representative Moeller. Please put me on as a co-sponsor.

(Chair recognizes Representative Villa)

Representative Villa:

So, as a school social worker in DuPage county for about 15 years, I always found ways to display the Pride Triangle, with the colors, because my space and my job as a social worker was to provide services to all students who came to my office. As a school social worker at times it was difficult for me, because in some of the buildings I worked in I was kind of like the sole champion for rights for our students who had any kind of question as to what their sexual orientation was.

In my perspective as a mental health worker, it would appear that this was a wonderful way to just bring attention to the differences that we all have. So, I guess my question would be about just specifically that mental health aspect of it, and what your thoughts are ... the gentleman, I don't remember his name, I'm sorry. (referring to Mr. Rivera)

Mr. Rivera:

I'm dealing with the issue of students in the public schools who have a certain religious belief, or their parents do, depending on the age, of their faith. And that's important to them. And if we are to talk about disagreements, that we can disagree, we can have differences, then we have to respect their differences. This is part of respect for them, too.

And it's about letting them develop their faith without the government coming in and saying 'we're going to mandate something' that can be against their faith. We're not asking for teaching religious belief. We're just saying -- because this is not our bill -- we're just saying we would like the respect for these students and let them have their faith, let them go with their faith. We have to teach respect -- that's a given across the board -- and that we can disagree. So, let me leave with that statement.

Representative Villa:

Just as a follow-up, I also would have a cross in my office because that represented my belief as well. And that was another thing that was also sometimes difficult because I wasn't sure what people would think about my cross in my office. We'll agree to disagree on the other.

(Chair recognizes Representative Stava-Murray)

Representative Stava-Murray:

I have one question for the gentleman. At what point do you draw the line, in which a religious principle cannot be mandated by the state? Because there could be a religion that pops up, someone could make a religion, that says 'females should not be educated?' And so, are we not allowed as a state to mandate that there's equality on whether or not a female could be educated?

Or if someone – that's why there's religious schools, for religion to be taught in religious schools. And so, that is not the place of a public school. And any religious principle, where is the line drawn? And right now we're seeing would there be some risk of suicide that you think is going to happen for those religious students? Because that's currently what's happening in our current state for our students. So, there's not equality.

Mr. Rivera:

Probably a bigger statement than you'd want me to make. Basically, I think what I'm coming from this perspective of, is to say that I'm not promoting a religion. But for those who have a religious belief, for them to have that religious belief is part of the diversity that we would want. It is part of protecting those students. I don't think we want to say "if you have a religious belief then you need not apply at a public school." We should allow those students who have a certain belief, live with their belief.
(interrupted)

Representative Stava-Murray:

How does this prevent living with their belief?

Mr. Rivera:

If your pushing against their religious belief, especially when they're young, that can be a problem. They say "wait a minute, my parents said this but the school said that, and now I'm confused, I'm concerned..." (interrupted)

Representative Stava-Murray:

You know, this bill actually doesn't say, actually does not say, the way in which it could be taught. And I would like to be added as a co-sponsor on this bill. And I think it could be even stronger, that it should be taught in a positive way because that's what it's intended. The law could even be strengthened. I am very appreciative of this bill. I think it could even do more. Thank you.

(Chair recognizes Representative Conroy)

Representative Conroy:

(unsure if these comments are directed at Mr. Rivera or to the committee as a whole)

I'm sorry, just one more comment. Just from what I consider my definition of intolerance, I think it's something I'd like you to consider. I went to Catholic school, I taught religious education for 15 years. My four sons were very much a part of the community of my church, which meant very much to me and my family.

When I became a Democratic legislator, I was told I could no longer hold a leadership role in my Catholic church. My four sons' faith has been shaken by that. Fortunately, my faith is solid and it's not in a building. I believe that this is something that you should consider when you're thinking about – this intolerance is also a form of hate. And I do believe that this is something that you should consider when you make these policies.

(Chair completes the roll call for reporting the bill out of committee)