

California bishops offer parents guidelines to opt out of public school programs

SAN FRANCISCO - The California Catholic bishops' conference is alerting parents and guardians of public school children that they have the right to "opt out" of many influences and classes that contradict their family's values - from instruction in how to perform sexual acts to the ins and outs of witchcraft and the conjuring of spirits.

The California Catholic Conference says most parents don't realize they need to specifically fill out a form every year for every child and for every activity they find objectionable.

"This is a way to empower parents to get involved," said Ned Dolejsi, Catholic conference executive director. "From Catholic teaching, we understand that parents are the primary teachers of their children."

At least nine of every 10 Catholic children in California attend public schools, with the figures even higher for Latino families, which send about 3 percent of their children to parochial schools, according to national statistics. The Catholic Conference guidelines, available at <https://cacatholic.org/index.php/topics/education.html>, are written in Spanish and in English.

Under California law, school districts are permitted to dismiss students in seventh grade and up for "confidential medical services," without parental notification and without logging any absence. Those services can include AIDS testing or treatment, birth control, or abortion.

"Because there is no "opt-out" available in the case of confidential medical services, it is important that parents or guardians maintain close communication with their children," the conference said in a back-to-school brochure for public school parents and guardians.

However, parents do have control over many other influences, if they have the stamina to navigate the system, the conference said.

According to California law, a parent or guardian “may request that his or her child be excused from any class, assembly, presentation, discussion, project, survey, extracurricular activity or program” on the following topics: “sex or family life education; AIDS or HIV education; acquisition and/or use of birth control devices or drugs; abortion; death education of any type including ‘assisted suicide’; homosexuality; sexual perversions; showing of R, NC-17 or X-rated films; meditation, yoga, conjuring of spirits; witchcraft; counseling except as recommended by the student’s physician; questionnaires, role playing or other strategies to examine the moral and religious beliefs of the student and/or the student’s family members; (or) diversity education which teaches tolerance for variant lifestyles,” the Catholic conference brochure says.

“I think it has been forgotten in our particular experience of education that legally the state through the school districts operates ‘in loco parentis’ or in place of the parent and that implies a partnership between the parents and the school district in the moral formation of their children,” Dolejsi said. “Every teacher who is out there who is worth their salt will say it is so much easier to educate a child when the parents are involved.”

Among the stack of forms sent home at the beginning of the school year is one that tells parents and guardians that permission is assumed unless the parent opts out, the conference said. Parents must opt out using a specific form available for the school office and specifically listing topics and activities from which they want their child excluded, it added.

Parents or guardians also have the right to examine copies of all tests, questionnaires or surveys that inquire about students’ or their parents’ personal beliefs, family life, religion or sex practices.