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Kristen McKinnon
Dept. of Elementary & Secondary Education
75 Pleasant Street
Malden, MA 02148

August 17, 2023

Re: Public Comment – *Massachusetts Comprehensive Health and Physical Education Framework*

Dear Ms. McKinnon,

The Massachusetts Catholic Conference (MCC) is the public policy office of the Catholic Church in the state representing the Archdiocese of Boston, along with the dioceses of Fall River, Springfield, and Worcester. Please accept this letter on behalf of the Roman Catholic Bishops of Massachusetts accepting your invitation to comment and raise concerns regarding the proposed Massachusetts Comprehensive Health and Physical Education Framework (CHPE) as published in draft form by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

As you know, the Vision Statement in the draft your office released earlier this summer states in part, *“All Massachusetts students will develop health and physical literacy through engagement in comprehensive, well-rounded, inclusive, medically accurate, developmentally and age-appropriate educational opportunities that include physical education, health education, and the development of social and emotional competencies”* (P.7). To that end, the MCC finds much of it to be positive and focused on lessons and skills beneficial to the students. For example, proper nutrition, regular exercise, hygiene, safety, teamwork, respect, substance abuse, etc. are emphasized throughout the document.

However, there also are very troubling and objectionable standards, recommended by DESE in each of the 4 grade level groups, that do not support the Vision Statement your office published. In particular, the draft Frameworks propose to introduce topics that are not “developmentally and age appropriate educational opportunities.” We would like to highlight some objectionable topics and respectfully ask that your office remove them from the final version of the CHPE. To be clear, the topics below are just a sampling of the objectionable materials outlined in the CHPE. We request that similar objectionable topics appearing throughout the Frameworks also be removed and will provide DESE further input upon request.

Pre-K – Grade 2 (Ages 5 – 8)

- Teachers would be introducing terminology such as “genitals” (p.19).
- Gender role stereotypes and their potential impacts on people of all ages and genders would be discussed (p.20).
- Personal boundaries including sexual boundaries are included along with what it means to be a heterosexual parent vs. other parents (i.e., same-gender parent) (p.20).
- Children as young as 5 years old would be taught this material. The MCC finds this material inappropriate for this age group.

Grades 3-5 (Ages 8 – 11)

- Teachers would “explain a variety of health-promoting practices to manage the social, physical, and emotional changes associated with puberty and into adolescence” (p.24).
- Teachers would give a specific description of both biological sex and gender identity and how behavior or appearance does not define one’s gender identity or sexual orientation (p.27).
- Most troubling, young children will be taught the definition of sexual intercourse (p.28).
- Children as young as 8 years old would be taught this material. Again, the MCC finds this material inappropriate for this age group.

Grades 6-8 (Ages 11-15) continuing through Grades 9-12 (Ages 15-18)

- Teachers would discuss ways to prevent sexually transmitted infections (p.30).
- Teachers would describe the consequences (*positive* and negative) of sexual activity (p.30).
- Teachers would discuss pregnancy along with “pregnancy options” (p.37).
- Children as young as 11 years old would be taught this material. Again, the MCC finds this material inappropriate for this age group.

The material described above is focused on the introduction of sex to children as young as 5 years old. The Frameworks fail the very Vision Statement put forth by DESE and quoted above. These standards are not “*developmentally and age-appropriate educational opportunities.*”

Furthermore, lessons to children in 6th grade, as young as 11 years old, about the “positive” consequences of sexual activity is simply wrong. What possibly could be positive about sexual activity at that age? Within the same age group, lessons about “pregnancy options” would inevitably lead to discussions in the classroom about abortion as an option – in the 6th grade!

Every child is a unique individual coming from different backgrounds, ethnicities, values, and family dynamics. They develop and mature on different timelines. More often than not, children within the same family develop and mature differently than their siblings. Given these facts, the role of parents or guardians is to introduce these sensitive topics at a time, place and age they deem appropriate for their children. Parents and guardians know their children far more than anyone else.

Discussions about sex and sexuality belong at home – particularly for the younger age group. Parents should be trusted by DESE. An approach of “one size fits all” is not the solution.

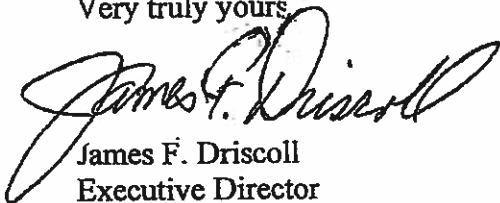
In addition, the draft Frameworks fail to clearly specify who would be teaching the children this material. Today, with all the public school teacher and nurse shortages across the state, would the burden fall on the in-class teachers that are already overburdened and not properly trained in the field?

If the Frameworks are adopted, it is critical that there be a concerted effort by DESE across all grade levels, prior to the start of the school year, to inform the parents and guardians about the content of the Frameworks. Those parents and guardians who choose to opt their child out of the program should be assured in writing that their children will not be subject to academic punishment and that no type of bullying will be tolerated against those who opt out. And, of course, those children should be provided with alternative educational opportunities. A preferred option would be to structure the program so that parents must choose to opt their child in rather than being required to opt their child out.

Finally, note is made of the list of Acknowledgments and Content Advisors whose input is recognized in the introductory pages of the Frameworks. A review of the list appears to indicate that, while there are a variety of consultants from public and private entities, there are none listed from the many and varied religious institutions within the Commonwealth. Please know that we stand ready to discuss these matters more fully at your convenience and share different perspectives on the objectionable topics.

Thank you for your attention.

Very truly yours,



James F. Driscoll
Executive Director