Water Safety in the Ocean State

Sophia Amore

The first thing that comes to mind when you think of Rhode Island is the state's incredible access to water. To most Rhode Islanders, especially during the summer, there's nothing better than getting to swim in the refreshing ocean or going out on a boat in Narragansett or Newport. For others, it is a source of fear. Without the ability to swim, not only is it a safety risk, but it prevents members of our community from enjoying everything our state has to offer. What if water safety was made a priority?

In the United States, 76 percent of drowning deaths each year involved children younger than 5 years old. Having the ability to swim not only makes you feel more comfortable when around water but is also a necessary life skill. A study from the Red Cross found that nearly two-thirds of the parents surveyed reported that their child cannot demonstrate all five basic skills that could save their lives in the water, and; of the parents surveyed 65 percent are parents of children aged 4-12 and 51 percent are parents of teens aged 13-17. The importance of water safety was something that Alexander Hamilton understood, as he was the founder of the United States Coast Guard. When discussing the purpose of the of the Coast Guard he said it was "for the protection of lives and property at sea". Alexander Hamilton recognized the importance of water safety in 1790, and it is still a relevant issue today.

This is a topic that is very important to me. I have been a competitive swimmer for seven years, and I have been teaching swim lessons for the past two. When I am teaching, the number one rule is to never take your eyes off the students. If a student falls in the water, I must reach them as quickly as possible while making sure the other students are also safe. One of the first skills the children learn is the steps to take when they fall in the water. This skill can be lifesaving

in a less controlled environment. However, they are just a few children out of many who need to learn such valuable skills. What about the many students who do not have the ability to take swim lessons? Some children do not learn how to swim simply because it is an extra expense that their family cannot afford to take on.

The easiest solution to this issue would be to make swimming part of our education system. In England, swimming instruction is a part of the national primary school curriculum. In just one year, six percent more students aged seven to eleven could swim the length of an average sized pool unaided thanks to the program. In comparison, in Canada and the U.S., swimming is optional and depends on each individual areas' access to pools. However, some cities in the United States that have access to water have implemented systems to provide swim lessons. San Diego offers free swim instruction at local community pools, while Alaska has made swimming part of their education curriculum through their Learn to Swim Program in Juneau.

Aspects of these programs could be implemented here in Rhode Island. Over the past few years, several pools have been built or renovated, making pools more accessible to most Rhode Islanders. By making swimming part of the statewide curriculum, or by offering free swim lessons to those in the community who cannot afford private ones, water safety would become as much of a priority as any other basic life skill. It is important that school remains dedicated to important subjects like math, science, English, and history, but swimming is arguably just as important. When I was in elementary school, art, music, and physical education were classes that were held on a weekly basis, rather than daily. Swim lessons could be added to the schedule in a similar way. Instead of cutting into their physical education class, a once a week course could be added just like those subjects. Or, once or twice a month the students could be brought to their local pool to take a swim lesson, in place of their physical education class. By bringing water safety into the

classroom, it would ensure that young children would learn the importance of water safety skills. The water is something that should be enjoyed not feared.

This topic is often seen as far less important than other life saving skills such as CPR. But for a young child, it can be the difference between life and death. The CDC reports that in 2014, among children 1 to 4 years old who died from an unintentional injury, one-third died from drowning. They also reported that about one in five people who die from drowning are children 14 and younger, and; for every child who dies from drowning, another five receives emergency department care for nonfatal submersion injuries. Since water is quite accessible here in Rhode Island, we should be taking steps to ensure that every citizen of our state is given the ability to enjoy swimming and water activities safely and responsibly.

Alexander Hamilton once said, "The people alone have an incontestable, unalienable, and indefeasible right to institute government and to reform, alter, or totally change the same when their protection, safety, prosperity, and happiness require it". This is one of my personal favorite quotes from Alexander Hamilton because of they way it encompasses the idea that just because something is one way now, does not mean that it cannot be changed in the future. Just because learning to swim is not currently a part of Rhode Island's education curriculum, does not mean that it cannot, or should not, be incorporated into the system in the future. Learning to swim reduces the risk of people, especially children, from drowning or getting seriously injured. If more states and other countries had a similar mindset and adopted swim instruction systems of their own, it could create a global change. But for now, Rhode Island is a great place to start. We are the Ocean State after all.

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