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November 26, 2018

Chairwoman Peggy Lehner  
Senate Education Committee  
The Ohio Senate  
Senate Building  
1 Capitol Square, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor  
Columbus, Ohio 43215

RE: *Support for HB 428*

Dear Ms. Lehner:

I serve as Chair of the Church Law Practice Group within our multi-state firm, including our Cleveland and Columbus, Ohio offices. We strive to provide legal counsel to churches and houses of worship of all denominations and faiths, and the congregations comprised of individuals seeking to live out their faith in their daily lives as an expression of the inherent right to Free Exercise of Religion guaranteed by the United States Constitution. Over the past several years I have been fielding an ever increasing number of calls from concerned parents and teachers seeking clarity over what their students may do as part of their religious expression. All of them are afraid that religious expression is not permitted in schools or school-related activities, and that they may be breaking the law if they speak of their faith freely, or even gather with other like-minded believers. Well-meaning teachers are afraid that any expression of faith is "illegal." School administrators are afraid that they will expose their district to liability if they permit any hint of Christianity in their winter-concerts. This is the antithesis of what was intended by the First Amendment.

The very active push from organizations dedicated to preserving the separation of church and state has ironically created a scenario where the state is suppressing religious expression. The laudable goal of "State neutrality on matters of religion" has morphed into the perception that the State cannot permit the free exercise of religion on anything which bears the slightest imprimatur of state sponsorship. Religious discourse (Christian in particular) is viewed as somehow poisonous, deserving of quarantine into private homes and churches. This is neither the law, nor the intent of the law, but is becoming ensconced as the popular view by default.

HB 428 is needed to protect religious expression in the public marketplace. It is needed to clarify for educators and administrators that individual religious expression is not a second-class form of expression, but rather is a constitutional right. HB 428 will help protect ALL religious expression equally, and will protect the free exercise of religion guaranteed by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

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I urge the passage of HB 428 as a bi-partisan show of support for the religious rights of all persons in Ohio, including those in our schools.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a large, stylized initial 'F' followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Forrest A. Norman