

Dear Chair Fowler Arthur, Vice Chair Odious, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Education Committee,

Thank you for considering my written testimony in opposition to HB 117.

Many years ago, when I was a first-year public high school teacher in Pennsylvania, our school's traditional start to the day included the Pledge of Allegiance. (Growing up in Ohio, my public school did not require us to say the pledge, although we did so at assemblies and a few other occasions.) Requiring my PA students to say the Pledge concerned me - not because there is anything inherently wrong with the Pledge, but because I had trouble requiring students to say a pledge that conflicted with their own personal beliefs. In particular, one of my students identified himself as a Jehovah's Witness, and he told me his religious beliefs did not allow him to recite the Pledge. I advised him to simply stand and stay silent. I felt it would not be right for me to FORCE him to recite the Pledge if it went against his personal beliefs. However, even if a student refused to say the Pledge for no particular reason, I felt that was not my business. Rather I felt it was my duty to require silence during the Pledge, but not recitation. To my knowledge, there was no official school policy about how teachers should handle refusal to recite the pledge.

The Pledge has a history, and it has changed over the years.

See <https://www.ushistory.org/documents/pledge.htm>. The current text of the Pledge is as follows (note that "under God" was a later addition):

"I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

The pledge is to the flag, but of course the flag is a symbol representing our "indivisible" Republic whose goal is purported to be "liberty and justice for all."

I find it curious that, while our country's - and state's - leaders might still be SAYING the Pledge, many are clearly not honoring it. Currently, many of the policies of the federal government, as well as Ohio's government, are effectively DIVIDING our Republic, rather than unifying it. Here in Ohio, SB1 has banned "diversity, equity and inclusion" in our institutions of higher education. Two other bills (pending) would do the same divisive work in K-12 public schools.

ICE agents, at the behest of our current president, are disregarding immigration laws, arresting, deporting, or sending to notorious prisons residents without providing due process. How is this "liberty and justice for all"? Are immigrants now excluded from the goal of "liberty and justice for all"? Several bills pending in the Ohio legislature make it even more likely for non-citizens to be mistreated in the future (HB 42, HB 26, for example).

At a time when the very words of the Pledge of Allegiance are being routinely cast aside, why would we force students to repeat an empty pledge? If we want to honor the Pledge of Allegiance, we must honor the stated goals, as put forth by our founding fathers - a Republic that is to be "indivisible" and "with liberty and justice for all." If we are serious about respecting the Pledge of Allegiance, we need to begin to understand what it means and how it should apply to our government's policies and actions.

FORCING students to recite a pledge simply sets up potential "control" conflicts. How is a teacher expected to enforce such a law? What is the consequence for refusing to recite the Pledge? Even more importantly, what message will be sent to students?

Please consider the consequences of passing HB 117 and say NO.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Deborah Cooper