

Dear Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram and the other esteemed members of this committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about Senate Bill 34. I'm speaking today as a private individual with two sons in Ohio public schools who have also spent time in a private Christian school.

Our Nation's Founders Were Seeking Refuge from State-Supported Religion

As a direct descendent of pilgrims who came to Massachusetts Bay Colony in search of religious freedom, I soundly reject this bill due to its inclusion of the Ten Commandments, which serves no secular educational purpose for Ohio students and violates their religious freedom.

My 12th great-grandfather, James Cole, settled Cole's Hill around 1633. This historic site is rumored to have been the Pilgrims' original burial ground. Cole also owned the land where Plymouth Rock rests.

Plymouth Rock was then the entry point for my other direct ancestors who arrived in the colonies seeking religious freedom from the Church of England, including my 10th great-grandfather George Wheeler, Sr, his wife Katherine Penn, and their children who sailed from Bedford, England to the United States in 1635. George's brothers and their families also journeyed with them. They were following a Puritan minister named Peter Bulkley, who was unwilling to conform to the requirements of the Church of England, which he believed was leaning too much toward Catholicism.

These Wheeler families were among the earliest settlers of Concord, Massachusetts, where my 10th great-grandfather served as a selectman and held other prominent civic leadership roles.

The Wheelers also purchased land directly from the local indigenous tribes. Among the Wheeler's landholdings in Concord were the "frog ponds," including Walden Pond, where they performed sacred baptisms. One of these Wheeler relatives later loaned their cabin on Walden Pond for Harvard classmate Henry David Thoreau to stay in while writing a book.

In the 1700s, Wheeler descendants served in the Revolutionary War, some as spies. In appreciation of their service, my ancestors received land grants in what was then Virginia, which they settled and named a new Concord while also traveling through the wildlands of Kentucky as circuit preachers.

Another 10th great-grandfather, William de Jayne I, sailed to New Haven, Connecticut Colony, in 1643 to pursue freedom from the Church of England. He then briefly returned to England to serve as Oliver Cromwell's bishop as Cromwell sought to dethrone King Charles I during the English War.

Religious faith and religious freedom are integral parts of my DNA. For that reason, I strongly oppose Senate Bill 34.

Whose Ten Commandments Will Get Preferred Treatment?

Public entities should not be able to determine what state-sponsored religious texts can be displayed in public buildings, including schools. This type of state-sponsored religion is what my ancestors and so many others fled to avoid.

Even though the Ten Commandments might have motivated some of our earliest founders, their inclusion in Senate Bill 34 as a founding document on the same level as the Bill of Rights or Preamble to the Constitution is fraught with complications.

Multiple versions of the Ten Commandments appear in the Bible, in Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 4:13 and Deuteronomy 10:4. Jews, Catholics, and Protestants use [different versions and numbering](#) for the Commandments. By favoring a particular version of the Ten Commandments, this law would not only violate the Constitution's provision that the government should not establish religion. It also would force school boards to determine which religion among adherents to the Ten Commandments was most favorable.*

In addition, the allowance of sculptures or monuments violates the Ten Commandments itself, which command, "You shall not make for yourself any idol."

My ancestors came escaping religious persecution—*from other Christians*. Selecting and then displaying the Ten Commandments would only serve to disenfranchise students of all beliefs, regardless of whether or not they follow any version of the Ten Commandments.

Including the Ten Commandments Violates Current Ohio Code

Senate Bill 34 is unconstitutional, and it conflicts with the current Ohio code, section 3314.03.A, which states, "The school will be nonsectarian in its programs, admission policies, employment practices, and all other operations and will not be operated by a sectarian school or religious institution. "

It also contradicts Section 3319.614, "Policies prohibiting affirmations of specific beliefs from HB 214, which passed in the 135th General Assembly. It states: "(A) Within ninety days after the effective date of this section, the board of education of each school district shall adopt a policy that states all of the following: (1) The school district shall not solicit or require an employee or applicant for employment or academic admission to affirmatively ascribe to, or opine about, specific beliefs, affiliations, ideals, or principles concerning political movements, or ideology. (2) The school district shall not solicit or require a student to affirmatively ascribe to specific beliefs, affiliations, ideals, or principles concerning political movements, or ideology.

The school district shall not use statements of commitment to specific beliefs, affiliations, ideals, or principles concerning political movements, or ideology as part of the evaluation criteria for employees or applicants for employment, or employees who are seeking career progression or benefits. (4) The school district shall not use statements of commitment to specific beliefs, affiliations, ideals, or principles concerning political movements or ideology as part of the academic evaluation of students."

In my belief, nothing about mandating documents in classrooms seems in line with the framers of the U.S. Constitution, but allowing displays of the Ten Commandments in public classrooms is the most egregious component of the bill. Thank you for the freedom to testify today about our freedoms and for your time.

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