

Dear Senator Brenner and the members of the Education Committee,

As a rabbi, I am deeply concerned about and strongly oppose SB 34, which would require school boards to display in every classroom at least one of nine purportedly historical educational documents. The Ten Commandments is among the list of nine options set forth in the bill. The inclusion of Biblical scripture in this list of otherwise political documents harms religion and people of faith, especially those who follow minority faiths.

Although some may try to claim that posting the Ten Commandments in schools honors religion, the opposite is true. The commandments set forth in the Hebrew Bible, known to Christians as the Old Testament, are generally considered revered religious scripture for both Jews and Christians. Treating this sacred scripture as just another item up on the wall in the classroom of a secular school, as SB 34 would, demeans and trivializes a text that is holy to many and will inevitably exclude students of minority faiths.

Indeed, when it comes to the specific role, text, and meaning of the commandments, there are important differences, even among those who may follow this scripture. Thus, if school boards were to choose to display the Ten Commandments in classrooms or elsewhere, it would be impossible to select a version that is inclusive of all Jewish and Christian believers. Jews, Protestants, and Catholics each have a version of the Ten Commandments that is distinct in form and meaning from the others, and this is before issues of differing translations and interpretive traditions are introduced.

But even if school boards adopted and displayed an exclusively Jewish version of the Ten Commandments, however, this would still run afoul of core Jewish principles and beliefs. We value the right to instill our Jewish beliefs and faith tradition in our children, without interference by the government. And our faith system generally opposes proselytizing our religion to people of other faiths, trying to convert people to Judaism, or pressuring them to otherwise accept Jewish beliefs. We believe that every person has the right to come to their own religious beliefs, with the assistance of their family and faith communities.

In the school context, that means that every student—whether Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh, Native American, Muslim, or any other faith or non-religious background—should feel welcome and safe in school, without any pressure to adopt a particular set of religious beliefs. Their sense of belonging should not depend on conforming to government-approved religious dictates. That is exactly what will happen, however, if SB 34 is enacted and schools choose to display the Ten Commandments in every classroom or in other places on campus.

Unfortunately, this bill represents another example of using religion for political gain and purposes. Although passage might be politically expedient, it will undermine religious freedom for all. As a rabbi and citizen of Ohio, I urge you either to reject this bill in its entirety or, at a minimum, to eliminate the Ten Commandments from the list of documents that school boards may select for display.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Megan Doherty
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