

Good afternoon, Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and the members of the Senate Education Committee.

My name is Danielle Firsich, and I am the Director of Public Policy for Planned Parenthood Advocates of Ohio and Planned Parenthood of Greater Ohio. I am writing to voice my strong opposition to Senate Bill 34, titled the “Historical Educational Displays Act.” While it is true that this bill would require public schools to display only one of the listed historical documents in every classroom, the inclusion of The Ten Commandments is an inappropriate and preferential means to emphasize Christian religious values at the expense of the tenets of religious freedom upon which this country was founded. This document starkly stands out as the sole non-secular option provided by this legislature and is an imposition of religious beliefs that isolates non-Christian students and amounts to religious coercion.

There is longstanding judicial reasoning at both the state and federal level that highlights the unconstitutional nature of such a requirement. Per a recent NBC news article discussing this bill:

“In June 2002, the ACLU of Ohio won two court cases in one week challenging the display of the Ten Commandments in public high schools in the state. The first of the two cases specifically barred public schools from displaying the Ten Commandments, reinforcing a 1980 Supreme Court case that agreed posting the Ten Commandments in a public school violated the First Amendment.”

As recently as 2019, a New Philadelphia, Ohio school was made to remove a 92-year-old plaque displaying the Ten Commandments after the Freedom from Religion Foundation said it violated the First Amendment.¹

A federal district judge struck down Louisiana’s bill requiring that the Ten Commandments be displayed in public school classrooms in November of 2024, citing it as “unconstitutional on its face” and engaged in clearly “overtly religious” purpose.² Similar bills in Texas, Oklahoma and Utah have also failed to go into effect as legal battles ensue over their blatantly unconstitutional nature.

There is also a longstanding federal precedent regarding the display of such documents in public school classrooms, as this legislative body well knows. In the landmark 1980 case *Stone v. Graham*, the Supreme Court ruled that Kentucky's law requiring the posting of the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms was unconstitutional, as it violated the First Amendment--which says Congress can “make no law respecting an establishment of religion”—and was "plainly religious in nature" while lacking an educational or secular purpose.²

Finally, the proposal of this bill follows a string of recent legislative priorities that inappropriately align with national Christian organizations and lobbyists pushing for the unconstitutional establishment of biblical principals in both public and private life. Per a recent NBC4 analysis, members of the Ohio legislature have strongly established links with groups like the National Association of Christian Lawmakers, who have played a strong role in the push for both religious release instruction in public schools, and the display of Christian historical documents such as The Ten Commandments.³ These efforts are an unpopular attempt to further strongarm our already under-supported and underfunded public schools, as well as chip away at the clear-cut separation of church and state present in the U.S. Constitution’s Establishment Clause. It is incredibly likely

that this bill will meet the same fate as the aforementioned state and federal cases, resulting in a waste of both taxpayer time and money as litigation ensues.

I encourage this committee to vote no on this clearly unconstitutional bill, and to instead devote meaningful time and effort to inclusionary and constitutionally founded priorities that elevate and support our public education systems and the diverse students within them.

Thank you.

¹ <https://www.nbc4i.com/news/politics/ohio-senate-bill-would-allow-public-schools-to-display-the-ten-commandments/>

² <https://apnews.com/article/ten-commandments-law-blocked-public-schools-louisiana-87b3dde94e583fdbb9ecb26db42b0206>

³ <https://www.nbc4i.com/news/politics/ohio-bill-to-put-ten-commandments-in-classrooms-has-ties-to-national-group/>