



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

June 24, 2025

The Honorable Sen. Andrew O. Brenner
Chair, Senate Education Committee
1 Capitol Square
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Re: OPPOSE SB 156, Violating Students' Fundamental Rights

Dear Chairperson Brenner and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

American Atheists, on behalf of its more than 2,300 constituents in Ohio, writes in opposition to SB 156, a blatantly unconstitutional bill that violates the fundamental rights of Ohio students. This bill claims that requiring public schools to promote religious morals and doctrine will prevent students from becoming trapped in the cycle of poverty, despite all evidence to the contrary. Not only would this initiative violate the fundamental religious freedom rights of all Ohioans, it would not solve the underlying issues behind introducing this bill. Rather than spend finite educational resources on promoting initiatives which lack substantive merit by impermissibly injecting religious doctrine into nonsectarian public schools, lawmakers should instead focus their attention on enacting evidence-based solutions to the state's poverty rates. We strongly urge you to help Ohio students by rejecting this bill.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the "wall of separation" between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheists are accepted as members of our nation's communities and where bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building, and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. American Atheists believes that no young person should be subject to religious coercion by the government.

SB 156 mandates that public school districts adopt and implement a statewide "model curriculum" explicitly designed to instill certain "character traits and fundamental values" in students. Although the bill purports to promote civic virtue and other supposed traits necessary for long-term success, many of the values, including "respect for religious faith, morality, wisdom, and knowledge" and "respect for lifelong marriage, sexual fidelity within marriage, and sexual abstinence outside of marriage," are pulled directly from religious doctrine. Despite the bill drafters' characterization, these are not neutral character traits universally accepted as beneficial to society. Rather, they are an expression of a particular theological worldview. The ultimate effect of SB 156, were it to be enacted, would be to use publicly funded, nonsectarian schools to transmit a government-favored religious perspective to the detriment of all other religious and nonreligious beliefs.

AMERICAN ATHEISTS

225 Cristiani Street • Cranford, NJ 07016-3214
(908) 276-7300 • www.atheists.org

Using compulsory, state-approved curricula to promote religious principles violates one of our nation's founding principles: Religion and the government should remain in separate spheres to ensure all Americans' religious beliefs are respected. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment requires that the government not favor one religion over another or favor religious belief over nonbelief.¹ This constitutional guardrail is especially critical when children are involved, as they are particularly vulnerable to religious coercion within educational settings.² Bills such as SB 156 carve out a space for religion in one of the nation's most important institutions — publicly funded, nonsectarian schools — and creates an impermissible risk that students' religious freedom will be violated.

This bill's requirement that students be taught to respect religious belief and conform their future romantic lives to religious interpretations of marriage effectively transforms the so-called “character education” into a vehicle for state-endorsed religion, regardless of whether laudable, broadly-applicable virtues, like charity and hard work, are also included within the curriculum. Including these religious principles would grant public schools license to privilege a single religious perspective over all other religious and nonreligious beliefs. According to the Pew Research Center, 28% of America identifies as a religious “none,” surpassing both Catholics (23%) and evangelical Protestants (24%).³ Moreover, nearly one in three nonreligious students report experiencing discrimination or other adverse interactions in educational settings explicitly because of their lack of religious affiliation.⁴ This means that, if SB 156 were enacted, a significant number of Ohio students — including nonreligious students — would become a captive audience for religious content in public schools regardless of their own beliefs.

Not only would this be a flagrant violation of their fundamental rights, it would further entrench existing religious discrimination by empowering students whose beliefs already conform with the government's message. Laws that privilege a single set of religious beliefs violate the essential constitutional protections enshrined in the First Amendment and create an environment ripe for religious discrimination against students. Lawmakers should instead adopt policies that foster a respect for all religious beliefs — including nonreligious belief — so that every student feels accepted and supported while at school.

¹ *Everson v. Bd. of Educ.*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947) (“The ‘establishment of religion’ clause of the First Amendment means at least this: Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another. Neither can force nor influence a person to go to or to remain away from church against his will or force him to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion. . . . In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect ‘a wall of separation between church and State.’”); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 216 (1963) (“this Court has rejected unequivocally the contention that the Establishment Clause forbids only government preference of one religion over another.”).

² See *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968) (“the vigilant protection of constitutional freedoms is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools”); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421, 431 (1962) (“When the power, prestige, and financial support of government is placed behind a particular religious belief, the indirect coercive pressure upon religious minorities to conform to the prevailing officially approved religion is plain.”).

³ Jason DeRose, *Religious ‘Nones’ Are Now the Largest Single Group in the U.S.*, NPR (Jan. 24, 2024), <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/24/1226371734/religious-nones-are-now-the-largest-single-group-in-the-u-s>.

⁴ S. Frazer, A. El-Shafei, A.M. Gill, *The Tipping Point Generation: America's Nonreligious Youth*, American Atheists & Secular Student Alliance (2020), <https://www.secularsurvey.org/youth>.

In addition to being a gross violation of students' rights, this bill directly undermines the fundamental rights held by parents that our nation has long recognized. Public education is the bedrock of our pluralistic society, a place where students can go to learn no matter their background, beliefs, or nonbelief. If parents desire for their children to receive a religious education, they have the right to send their children to private school or homeschool them.⁵ When the government decides to act as the ultimate authority in defining and arbiter of "proper" beliefs, as it proposes to do in SB 156, it supersedes parents' fundamental right to direct the upbringing of their children and undermines parents' responsibility to shape their children's ethical and religious development. Rather than usurping parents' roles by implementing a state-sanctioned moral code, public schools should remain focused on equipping students with necessary critical thinking skills and providing the educational foundation required to be an active participant in society.

Proponents of bills like SB 156, which promote a so-called "Success Sequence," argue that embedding "character education" into public school curricula will instill the essential traits young people need to thrive in the workforce and prevent them from becoming trapped in a cycle of poverty. Organizations like the American Enterprise Institute similarly promote this supposed sequence by claiming that individuals who graduate from high school, obtain a full-time job, and wait until marriage to have children are all but guaranteed to live an economically stable life.⁶

Closer scrutiny of these claims reveals significant shortcomings with these arguments and misinterpretation — or even blatant misrepresentation — of the underlying data. For example, the American Enterprise Institute states that reports from the Bureau of Labor Statistics clearly prove that the success sequence cited by SB 156 will ensure Ohio students escape poverty when, in fact, the Bureau's reports state the opposite:⁷

- Thousands of full-time workers still fall below the poverty line.
- Individuals who have only obtained a high school diploma are twice as likely to fall below the poverty line compared to those who attended some college or received an associate's degree, and were three times more likely to fall below the poverty line than those with a bachelor's degree or higher.
- Married couples with children were three times more likely to fall below the poverty line than married couples without children.
- There is no statistically significant difference between married couples living in poverty (6.1%) and unrelated individuals, defined as those living alone or with non-family, living in poverty (6.6%).

⁵ *Meyer v. Nebraska*, 262 U.S. 390, 400 (1923) (holding that parents have the fundamental right to direct the upbringing of their children); *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 268 U.S. 510 (1925) (holding that the fundamental right to direct the upbringing of one's children includes the ability to send children to private school for a religious education).

⁶ Brad Wilcox & Wendy Wang, *The Power of the Success Sequence*, Am. Enter. Inst. (May 26, 2022), <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-power-of-the-success-sequence/> (claiming that 97% of Millennials who follow the "Success Sequence" "are not poor when they reach adulthood").

⁷ *A Profile of the Working Poor*, 2021, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (Nov. 2023), <https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/working-poor/2021>.

- Although full-time workers are somewhat less likely to live in poverty than those who work part-time, there are a significant number of full-time workers living in poverty and those working part-time involuntarily.

The Bureau clearly states that (1) marriage status does not significantly affect whether a family lives in poverty, (2) people with higher education are less likely to live in poverty, and (3) there are major labor issues, like low pay and involuntary part-time employment, contributing to our nation's poverty rates that cannot be overcome by simply encouraging young people to obtain full-time employment, adhere to religious doctrine, or adopt certain character traits.

Instead of infringing upon the fundamental rights of Ohio's students and parents in pursuit of an ultimately ineffective remedy, lawmakers should focus on guaranteeing that public school students receive the education and support they need to succeed later in life — regardless of which path they choose. Students deserve the tools to thrive in a pluralistic society, such as an understanding of scientific inquiry and respect for beliefs that differ from their own. Legislating morality accomplishes none of these goals. We strongly urge you to prioritize the best interests of Ohio students by rejecting SB 156.

Should you have any questions regarding American Atheists' opposition to SB 156, please contact me at vanderson@atheists.org.

Sincerely,



Victoria Anderson
State Policy Specialist
American Atheists