

Dear Sen. Brenner, Sen. Blessing, and Sen. Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee,

Thank you for considering my written testimony in opposition to SB 34, the "Historical Educational Displays Act," which would REQUIRE every public classroom in Ohio to display at least one text from a list of nine documents, including the Ten Commandments.

Although the bill does not *require* that the Ten Commandments be chosen from among the nine historical documents, *allowing* the Ten Commandments to be displayed in a public school opens the door to a violation of the church-state separation doctrine. Public school officials who decide to elevate the Ten Commandments in this way would send a message to students about the relative worth and importance of the Ten Commandments in comparison with other religious documents/tenets.

The Ten Commandments certainly might be considered a "historical document," since it has informed the behavior of a great many in our society. However, other faiths have similar documents, and an argument could be made that they are equally worthy of being displayed in a public school.

Our nation's founders created the church-state separation doctrine with good reason. Many early settlers had fled to America to escape religious persecution. They understood how a government could use a particular religion (or, conversely, how a particular religion could use government) to persecute those religious or spiritual beliefs might differ from those of a "sanctioned" creed. Surely we recall learning about the Crusades. And can we forget how Hitler's Nazis spread the "ideal" of Christian nationalism?

Similar legislation in other states has been struck down as unconstitutional because our nation was founded on a principle of "freedom of religion" - meaning freedom to worship as we choose AND freedom not to worship at all, if we so choose. The key is choice, and that choice should continue to belong to *all* those who attend our public schools.

If parents want their children to be educated in a particular religious tradition, those options are widely available, or parents can teach their children about their particular faith at home or through after-school or weekend programs provided by faith communities. Growing up, I attended a Thursday night program through our church, as well as Sunday school. I appreciated that instruction, but would not have wanted it to be provided through the public school I attended, nor, as I grew older and broadened my understanding, would I have welcomed any suggestion that one religion/faith is necessarily superior to any other. My parents guided my religious upbringing, as I believe is appropriate. It is NOT appropriate for a public school to do so.

In our zeal to encourage others to believe as we do, sometimes we forget that "our way" is not the only way. We can easily take for granted that, if the majority of our neighbors have a similar religious background, it must be the "right" one. However, we live in a multi-cultural, multi-faith society. Whether or not it is always quite comfortable, that fact is highly unlikely to change given our country's increasingly diverse demographics. The sharing of ideas, cultures, languages

and religions brings a richness that should be celebrated. These differences need not and should not divide us as citizens in a working democracy, where all of our voices are supposed to matter.

While parents have a right to send their children to a private religious school, taxpayers should not be responsible for funding such a choice. Unfortunately, church-state lines are becoming increasingly blurred. For example, LifeWise Academy has been skirting the church-state separation doctrine by removing children from public school classrooms during the school day. Although LifeWise attendees must have parental permission, these programs lack the sort of oversight and accountability that public schools provide. I have heard reports of children telling classmates who do not attend LifeWise programs that they are “going to hell.”

Children left behind when their classmates leave school and get treats are understandably upset by being left out, and frequently lobby their parents for the opportunity to join their classmates in LifeWise programming. Using children’s natural desire to “fit in” is an effective way to indoctrinate them into a particular belief system. In the case of LifeWise, for example, children are taught that those who identify as LGBTQ+ are “sinful.” This has led to some classroom bullying and an inhospitable learning environment. Children are impressionable, and tend to accept what their parents and teachers tell them. If we suggest to them that one set of beliefs is superior to another, what message do we send to children of other religions/faiths?

My own experience as a teacher showed me the importance of honoring differences and prohibiting bullying of any kind. Creating an accepting, inclusive environment is essential for true learning to take place. We can encourage students to memorize “facts,” but only in a nurturing, inclusive environment can all students be free enough to learn *how* to think.

If we intend to allow the Ten Commandments to be displayed in public schools, in the interest of fairness, we must also allow religious texts from other religious groups to be displayed. What religions/faiths would be included or excluded, and on what basis? Would the nature-focused Wiccan religion be recognized? How about Satanism?

SB 34, a seemingly innocuous bill, actually gets to the heart of who we are as a nation. The founders were clear in their intent to allow freedom *of* religion: the freedom to practice the religion of our own choosing as well as the freedom not to do so. They had learned this lesson the hard way, and we ignore their wisdom at our own peril.

Please say NO to SB 34 to protect our constitutional separation of church and state.

Thanks for your consideration.
Deborah K. Cooper