

Written Testimony on Senate Bill 181 - "Student Religious Expression - Athletics"

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Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee

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Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of Senate Bill 181.

Imagine being incredibly talented at your sport, practicing for years and years to excel, showing up to a competition, and being barred from participating because of something as trivial as how you are dressed. This is precisely what Senate Bill 181 will work to prevent. At the moment, this reality is far too common and is the reason so many children do not have the courage to pursue the sport they are passionate about. Senate Bill 181 is an absolute necessity for any religious school-aged child interested in participating in sports.

I am a Muslim American teenager who wears a headscarf, or hijab. As a hijabi fencer, I know firsthand how hard it is to be faced with the choice of compromising modesty for sports or having to leave a sport because it was so difficult to participate in hijab. Growing up, I've always looked up to professional athletes and their incredible talent but resigned to the fact that I would never be able to get far because I wore hijab. As I grew up watching gymnasts, dancers, and figure skaters gracefully compete, I felt as if I needed to compromise my faith to be like them. In 2016, when Ibtihaj Muhammad won an olympic medal while competing as part of the United States fencing team in a hijab, my eyes were opened to the world of fencing. I had never felt as passionate about a sport as I did fencing because I had a role model who looked exactly like me and still accomplished everything I could ever dream of doing. She taught me that there was no need to compromise my faith to do something I loved. Fencing is not known for its diversity. It is traditionally a white male sport and because of this, I constantly feel out of place and ostracized. If schools made a conscious effort to include Muslim girls and other religious students in sports through banning the discrimination of athletes based on their religious apparel, I believe many more boys and girls would find the courage to join previously exclusive sports like fencing. If Ibtihaj had been barred from joining her high school fencing club, she would never have become the icon that I and many other Muslim girls look up to today. Without her, I would not have qualified for the National Championships this past weekend. She has inspired me and countless others to pursue sports, something I never would have had the courage to do otherwise. This bill will allow so many children, who may have otherwise been barred, to fulfill their potential, and become great athletes and an inspiration to the next generation of religious children. This bill will show girls like me that no matter how you dress or what you believe, you are welcome to pursue your dreams and ambitions. This bill will show students in Ohio that there is no need to compromise faith to be involved in school sports. This bill will promote a much needed change in Ohio which is why it is so vital that it be passed.