



Senator Theresa Gavarone

2nd Ohio Senate District

Sponsor Testimony for Senate Bill 181

Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee

May 25, 2021

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Fedor and my colleagues on the Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee, I have mixed emotions while standing before you today. I pride myself on my communication with my constituents and many of my bills, like this one, come directly from those conversations. However, I am disappointed because I never thought I would need to be before this committee or any other to right such an egregious wrong.

Senate Bill 181 will prohibit any school, organization or athletic conference from adopting a rule, bylaw, or any other regulation that creates an obstruction to wearing religious apparel when competing in interscholastic athletics.

This issue garnered national and even international attention after my constituent, Noor Abukaram, a runner for Sylvania Northview was disqualified from a cross country race because, unbeknownst to her, she was not granted permission to compete in her hijab. Noor is on deck to testify today in support of the legislation, so instead of me explaining her personal story, I would prefer that you hear it directly from her.

As I mentioned, this became a viral story immediately after it happened. When I read about it, I was simply stunned. I learned that the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) was considering a change to the rule, and I was hoping the issue would be resolved that way. Unfortunately, during my meeting with Noor and her mom in my district, I learned that the rule was still burdensome.

I am excited for those of you who have not meet Noor to do so. She is an incredible young woman, and I am going to have the pleasure later this week to speak during her graduation. I have been fortunate enough in my time as a legislator and mom to meet a lot of great kids with exciting futures ahead of them. Noor is no exception. And as even Noor acknowledges, this bill isn't just about her or the expression of her own faith. She is taking a leadership role to ensure that no student-athlete in the state of Ohio will ever have to choose between competing in the sport they love or their religion. I am proud to join her in this fight.

This bill is identical to Senate Bill 288 from last General Assembly, and everyone on this committee, except for Senator O'Brien who was not with us last year, joined the rest our colleagues by voting unanimously for the bill both in committee and on the Senate Floor. Unfortunately, COVID-19 came into our lives a few weeks after I introduced the bill, so the momentum we had was blunted.

Chairman Brenner, thank you for granting me the chance to testify on this impactful legislation that has the support of the Christian, Jewish and Islamic communities, and I would be happy to answer any questions members may have.