Senator Theresa Gavarone

2nd Ohio Senate District
Sponsor Testimony for Senate Bill 181
House Primary and Secondary Education Committee
September 21, 2021

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Bird, Ranking Member Robinson and my colleagues on the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the chance to give sponsor testimony on SB 181 this afternoon.

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 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 in 2019 after my constituent, Noor Abukaram, who was 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. As a mother myself of a child who played sports in high school-hockey, lacrosse, and football- I know how hard these student athletes train to compete at the highest level. We have to remember these are high school students. Noor was a junior at the time of this incident, and she beat out seniors to compete at the district finals. Although she has always competed in her hijab, she was disqualified because her coach forgot to get a waiver.

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.

Following my meeting with Noor and her mother, we introduced legislation last General Assembly to ensure that no student-athlete goes through this again. Unfortunately, shortly after the bill passed out of the Senate unanimously, COVID-19 became a reality a few weeks later, causing the bill's momentum to slow.

I reintroduced this legislation as SB 181 in the spring following another incident Noor experienced at a track meet. Under the new rules, Noor did not need a waiver to wear her hijab during the race. Noor ran her race, but was asked for a waiver despite not needing one. Following the incident, her mother called me. My "hockey mom" spirit came out, and Noor and I were both ready to tackle this issue all over again.

Noor can tell you her story herself, hopefully during proponent testimony soon. I am excited for those of you who have not met Noor to do so. She is an incredible young woman, who graduated high school this spring and is now

a proud and involved Buckeye at The Ohio State University. I have been fortunate enough in my time as a legislator and mom to meet a lot of great young people 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.

SB 181 passed out of the committee and the Senate unanimously back in June. In the Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee, it received proponent testimony from passionate and supportive members from the Christian, Jewish and Islamic communities, which underscores the importance of this legislation to our students and their families from all backgrounds. Notably, not a single opponent came out against this bill either.

Chair Manning, thank you for granting me the chance to testify on this impactful legislation, and I would be happy to answer any questions members may have.