



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on November 15, 2019

Ohio House Passes Bill to Protect Religious Expression for School Students

The Ohio House of Representatives passed a bill on Wednesday to protect the religious expression of school students.

The “Ohio Student Religious Liberties Act of 2019” bill, which passed by a vote of 61-31, seeks to protect religious expression in educational settings. “No board of education of a school district shall adopt any policy or rule respecting or promoting an establishment of religion or prohibiting any pupil from the free, individual, and voluntary exercise or expression of the pupil’s religious beliefs in any primary or secondary school,” the bill reads.



This would include artwork, clothing, and even time, meaning students could have time allotted for private prayer under the bill, removing a current provision that limits public expressions of religious beliefs to lunch and non-instructional periods, *US News* reports.

“The board of education of each school district may provide for a moment of silence each school day for prayer, reflection, or meditation upon a moral, philosophical, or patriotic theme,” according to the legislation.

The bill guarantees students will not be required to participate in allotted moments of silence or forced to engage in activities that are “contrary to [their] religious convictions.”

Perhaps most importantly, the bill protects students from receiving poor grades if they refuse to give an answer that conflicts with their religious beliefs on assignments, potentially even if an answer the student does provide is considered to be scientifically inaccurate. Under the bill, students would be graded on “substance and relevance” in those cases, according to the bill’s sponsor, Republican Representative Tim Ginter.

Also under the legislation, student religious groups would be provided the same access to school facilities as is provided to secular groups.

The bill found support amongst all Republicans in the Ohio House. Representative Ginter told the *Columbus Dispatch* the bill “is not an expansion but a clarification of what students can and cannot do in religious expression.” In response to Democratic opposition, Rep. Ginter noted the bill is “inclusive” and will “positively enhance liberties.”

Democratic Representative Phillip Robinson claims the bill is unnecessary as the state “already protect[s] religious expression.”

But committee hearings on the bill undermine that claim. Students who spoke in favor of the bill stated their religious high-school clubs were not treated the same way as secular groups. Students even



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testified their groups were not included in the school yearbook, and were not allowed access to the same facilities as the secular groups.

Aaron Baer, president of Citizens for Community Value, said the measure “comes at a critical time in the culture and protects the right of Christian and non-Christian students alike to freely exercise their faith.”

Earlier this year, for example, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear a religious liberty case involving Christian student Caleigh Wood, who pursued a legal challenge against her Maryland public school for failing her assignment when she refused to cite Islamic prayer and for forcing her to sit through a PowerPoint presentation that denigrated her religion. According to the Thomas More Law Center, which took up Wood’s case, Wood and her classmates were made to sit through a PowerPoint presentation that claimed Muslims’ faith was stronger than that of the average Christian. Wood and her classmates were also required to profess the Islamic conversion creed, which states, “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.”

The bill has found some support with the American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio for its role in enshrining religious freedom, though the organization has raised concerns on how it will affect student learning, the *Washington Examiner* reports.

Gary Daniels, chief lobbyist of the American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio, articulated fears the bill could force teachers not to penalize students who claim the Earth is only 10,000 years old on assignments, for example.

Daniels cites the bill’s language, which states the instructor “shall not penalize or reward a student based on the religious content of a student’s work.”

However, Ginter rejects this claim, noting that under the legislation, teachers would still be permitted to grade students on their understanding of what was taught. “This doesn’t give student a Get Out of Jail Free card,” Ginter said.

Instead, Ginter offers, the legislation would protect students who would, for example, choose religious figures such as Moses or Mohammed for assignments in which they would have to write about historic figures.

The measure was sent to the Senate for a vote.

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