



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

January 18, 2019

The Honorable Senator Mike Groene
Chairperson, Education Committee
1445 K Street
Nebraska State Capitol Building
Room #1306
Lincoln, Nebraska 68509-469

Re: OPPOSITION for LB 73, Testimony from American Atheists in opposition to legislation requiring school boards to display the National Motto in classrooms and other school buildings in Nebraska.

Dear Chairperson Groene and Members of the Education Committee:

American Atheists, on behalf of its nearly 300 constituents in Nebraska, writes in opposition to LB 73, a controversial bill which requires school boards to display the national motto "In God We Trust" in each classroom and school building. We urge you to table this unnecessary and divisive bill. Further, we ask you to include this opposition statement as part of the official record.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the "wall of separation" between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation's communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. As advocates for religious liberty, American Atheists believes that no young person should be coercively subjected to religious speech by the government.

LB73 represents a complete abandonment of the principle of local control, as it requires the state to intrude into local classrooms and mandate what materials must be on the walls. Efforts to impose a political agenda onto public schools through this type of legislation is part of a multistate campaign by Christian nationalists to promote the false narrative that America was founded as a Christian nation. This bill undermines the spirit of the First Amendment and the separation of religion and government, which is the bedrock of our religious liberty.

Mandating "In God We Trust" posters in each school building violates students' freedom of religion by inserting one particular religious view into the classroom. Students and teachers have a variety of beliefs -- Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, to name just a few, which means that public schools must remain free from religious coercion. However, this measure would stigmatize students who are atheists, nonbelievers, and religious minorities, by forcing them to view the religious message promoted by these displays daily. Sadly, these displays may result in increased bullying and harassment against such students.

Currently, about 23% of adults in the US are religiously unaffiliated, and atheists and agnostics make up about 7% of the total population.¹ Among young people, studies show that approximately 13% of youth ages 13-18 identify as atheists and more than a third are non-religious.² In Nebraska, 20% of the population has no religious affiliation.³ The Nebraska Legislature should not marginalize this sizeable and growing population by purposefully inserting exclusionary messages such as “In God We Trust” into each classroom.

Finally, LB 73 would create potential liability for school districts and risk Nebraska taxpayer dollars to defend a law that is unnecessary and divisive. Nebraska’s education dollars should go to educating students, not to support political messages by special interests.

We urge you to table this unnecessary and controversial legislation. If you should have any questions regarding American Atheists’ opposition to LB 73, please contact me at 908.276.7300 x9 or by email at agill@atheists.org.

Sincerely,



Alison Gill, Esq.
Legal and Policy Director
American Atheists

CC: All members of the Education Committee

¹ Pew Research Center. A Closer Look at America’s Rapidly Growing Religious ‘Nones’ by Michael Lipka, 2015. Available at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/> (Last Visited January 17, 2019).

² Barna Group. Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z, 2018. Available at: <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/> (Last visited January 18, 2019).

³ Pew Research Center. Religious Composition of Adults in Nebraska. Available at: <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/nebraska/> (Last Visited January 16, 2019).