



# AMERICAN ATHEISTS

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February 20, 2019

The Honorable Rep. Regina Huff  
Chairperson, Standing Committee on Education  
702 Capital Ave.  
Annex Room 309  
Frankfort, Kentucky 40601

**Re: OPPOSITION for HB 46, Testimony from American Atheists in opposition to legislation requiring schools to display the National Motto**

Dear Chairperson Huff and Members of the House Standing Committee on Education:

American Atheists, on behalf of its more than 600 constituents in Kentucky, writes in opposition to HB 46, a controversial bill which undermines religious liberty by requiring schools to display the national motto "In God We Trust" in a prominent location in the school. We urge you to vote against this unnecessary and divisive bill.

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.

HB 46 represents a complete abandonment of the principle of local control, as it requires the state to intrude into local schools 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> Clarkson, Frederick. "'Project Blitz' Seeks to Do for Christian Nationalism What ALEC Does for Big Business." Religion Dispatches, published online Apr. 27, 2018. Available at: <http://religiondispatches.org/project-blitz-seeks-to-do-for-christian-nationalism-what-alec-does-for-big-business/> (Last visited February 19, 2019).

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.<sup>2</sup> Among young people, studies show that approximately 13% of youth ages 13-18 identify as atheists and more than a third are non-religious.<sup>3</sup> In Kentucky, 22% of the population has no religious affiliation.<sup>4</sup> The Kentucky Legislature should not marginalize this sizeable and growing population by purposefully inserting exclusionary messages such as “In God We Trust” into public schools.

Finally, HB 46 would create potential liability for school districts and risk Kentucky taxpayer dollars to defend a law that is unnecessary and divisive. Kentucky’s education dollars should go to educating students, not to support political messages by special interests.

We urge you to vote against this unnecessary and controversial legislation. If you should have any questions regarding American Atheists’ opposition to HB 46, please contact me at 908.276.7300 x309 or by email at [agill@atheists.org](mailto:agill@atheists.org).

Sincerely,



Alison Gill, Esq.  
Vice President, Legal and Policy  
American Atheists

CC: All members of the Kentucky House Standing Committee on Education

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<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center. Religious Composition of Adults in Kentucky. Available at: <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/kentucky/> (Last Visited February 20, 2019).