

Olivia Data
Testimony on HB 1145
Jan 14 2025

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RE: Testimony in Opposition of HB 1145

Good morning, Chairman Klemin and members of the committee. My name is Olivia Data, and I am a North Dakota resident here today to urge you to vote “Do Not Pass” on HB 1145.

I was born and raised in the state, and I’ve greatly benefited from a public school education here. I graduated from Century High School in 2022. My parents attended university in the state. My grandparents are proud UND alumni. And as someone who deeply appreciates our state’s schools, as I’m sure we all do in this room, I believe that this bill will cause far more harm than good to our students, teachers, administrators, and state as a whole.

Growing up, I considered myself agnostic. I went to elementary school at Highland Acres, and I remember classmates telling me that I would burn in Hell because I didn’t believe in God. Sometimes they said they’d pray for me; sometimes they left it at that. A boy in my grade told me this in the lunchroom once, and I remember the conversation for two reasons. One, he also insulted the pizza I was eating, and it was a good pizza, so that was just too far, and two, I didn’t understand how this boy who was completely respectful to me at all other times could be taught such a narrow corner of religion that something meant to instill love, peace, and neighborly affection in its followers would make him think he had to put his beliefs above mine.

Mind you, this took place in a public school without religious postings. Even without The Ten Commandments in every classroom, I remember feeling othered because of my beliefs. This is not to say, of course, that I don’t support teaching and learning about religion. I loved learning about different faiths in my social studies classes, and I believe that everyone can benefit from learning about religion. But this bill is not about teaching; it’s not even about instilling moral values in our state’s youth. It’s about control. Morality doesn’t come from a poster on the wall. Requiring The Ten Commandments to be posted in every classroom in the state will ostracize those who are not religious or who are part of faiths that don’t follow The Ten Commandments. And even for those who do follow them, it sends the message that our schools are a place of conformity rather than education.

HB 1145 is also a severe overreach of legislative powers. North Dakota parents have the right to choose how their children are educated. If they want to emphasize Abrahamic teachings, there are excellent private schools in our state. And in our public schools, surely issues like teacher shortages, equitable funding, or post-COVID behavioral and academic declines should take

priority over what posters are displayed in the classroom¹. This bill does not show care for our school systems but a disregard of the problems we're actually facing.

Furthermore, this bill is clearly unconstitutional. From the very foundations of our country, religious freedom has been a core American value, and this bill would violate the First Amendment. If we consider the History and Tradition test, our nation has a long precedent of upholding religious freedom, especially within educational spheres. Furthermore, *Stone v. Graham* has not been overturned, and the law in this case which was struck down included a note about secular applications and used private funds for the posters². Here, there is no such note, and Section 1.5 allows for school boards to spend public funds. There is simply no way that this law could be upheld without not only overturning years of United States legal precedent but diminishing the rights laid out in our Constitution.

To put it plainly, I believe that HB 1145 is deeply un-American. It goes against religious freedom, it promotes governmental overreach, and it ignores the needs and the rights of our people. I've wondered if this bill is perhaps a misguided reaction to the increasing political polarization I'm sure we all feel. But if so, the response to growing animosity and chaos should not be an attempt to limit freedom and homogenize our classrooms. Rather, we need to allow schools to foster peaceful disagreement, tolerance of differences, and love for our neighbors whether or not they adhere to the same religion.

Chairman Klemin and members of the committee, you have an opportunity to stand up for the American values of religious and intellectual freedom, and as a North Dakota resident, I urge you to take it. Please, vote "Do Not Pass" on HB 1145. Thank you for your time.

¹*Solutions for the Teacher Shortage in North Dakota*, Ricky Feir and Ethan Liu. North Dakota State University, February 2024: 5.

https://www.ndsu.edu/fileadmin/challeyinstitute/Solutions_for_the_Teacher_Shortage_in_North_Dakota.pdf; McCann, Adam. 2023. "Most & Least Equitable School Districts in North Dakota." WalletHub. September 7, 2023. <https://wallethub.com/edu/e/most-least-equitable-school-districts-in-north-dakota/77116>.

²"Stone v. Graham." Oyez. Accessed January 13, 2025. <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1980/80-321>; Robinson, Malila N. n.d. "Stone v. Graham | Law Case." Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Stone-v-Graham>.