



February 21, 2019

Members of the Kentucky General Assembly,

We write to ask you to vote “no” on House Bill 46, “An Act relating to the display of the national motto in public schools.” This bill would mandate that every elementary and secondary public school in the Commonwealth of Kentucky display, in a “prominent location,” the words “In God We Trust.”

We are a non-partisan, non-profit group that works to ensure that all people have the freedom to exercise their own deeply-held religious beliefs and that the government does not inappropriately endorse any specific religion or religions. These ideals were enshrined in our nation’s founding from the very beginning, and remain as crucial today as they were when the Bill of Rights was ratified in 1791.

As we have before, we ask you to refrain from mandating any religious observation or exercise of religion in our public schools. We firmly believe that our legislature should be working to ensure that schools are adequately funded, that teachers are appropriately compensated, and that our students receive the highest quality education possible. To do right by our students, these should be our priorities – not mandating that every school in the Commonwealth display a motto that has the appearance of endorsing religion.

Our state, like the country as a whole, is richly diverse in its religious beliefs and faith traditions. Nearly one-quarter of all Kentuckians identify as “unaffiliated (religious ‘nones’)” in their religious beliefs.¹ Others believe in religions outside the Judeo-Christian faith traditions. These Kentuckians should feel just as welcome in their public schools as those whose identities rest in a monotheistic religious tradition. A prominent display of “In God We Trust” send a thinly veiled message that only students who believe in God are welcome.

Beyond this, though, our courts have recognized the particular care with which governments must approach any religious activity within public schools. Because students are young and impressionable, “there are heightened concerns with protecting freedom of conscience from subtle coercive pressure in the elementary and secondary public schools.” *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577, 592 (1992). We are concerned that HB46, if passed and implemented, will exert pressure on our young and vulnerable student populations that they must subscribe to one particular religious belief over another. It could call unwanted attention

325 W. Main Street
Suite 2210
Louisville, KY 40202

(502) 581-9746
aclu-ky.org

Randy Strobo
President

Michael Aldridge
Executive Director

Frank Bencomo Suarez
Legal Assistant

Charlene Buckles
Major Gifts Officer

Amber Duke
Communications Director

George Eklund
*Community Engagement
Coordinator*

Heather Gatnarek
Staff Attorney

Amanda Hall
*Smart Justice Field
Organizer*

Africa Hands
*Operations & Development
Associate*

Keturah Herron
Organizer

Kate Miller
Advocacy Director

Corey Shapiro
Legal Director

¹ <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/kentucky/>.



to students who believe in a non-Christian faith or who identify as unaffiliated with any religion. We emphatically encourage the General Assembly to avoid creating a situation in which students could be excluded or bullied simply because of their religious beliefs.

We appreciate the attention the General Assembly pays to Kentucky's students and public schools, and we encourage the General Assembly to continue working to advance our state's educational opportunities and ensure that our public school students receive the very best education possible. As always, we remind the legislature that matters of faith are best left to individuals, families, and religious organizations, not state government. For these reasons, we ask that you vote "no" on HB46.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Corey Shapiro". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Corey Shapiro
Legal Director