

DALHART INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

315 Rock Island
Dalhart, Texas 79022
Phone – (806) 244-7810

Texas Senate
Senate Education Committee
Austin, Texas 78711

Re: Testimony in favor of H.B. 3678 to Senate Education Committee

To Member of the Senate Education Committee:

I had hoped to appear personally before this Committee, but with all of the activities at the end of the school year, it is very difficult to get away from the District.

I have been in public education since 1974. Twenty three of those years have been as a Superintendent in three different schools in West Texas. I was the superintendent from 1984 to 1989 in Smyer, from 1989 to 2002 I was superintendent in Whiteface and I have been superintendent in Dalhart since July 1, 2002.

During the time that I have served as a superintendent, I have witnessed many different changes and reactions to various court rulings that deal with religion or faith-based viewpoints in schools. Most educators appear to discourage or prevent students from expressing any view or mentioning anything that might express their beliefs. They are prohibited from mentioning anything that is related to God or religion in any way. Teachers are very careful not to allow students to mention Christ in any presentation at Christmas or Easter.

I know that there cannot be any legislation to overturn any court decisions, but there has been much confusion as to what is allowable and what is not. H. B. 3678 would clarify these rulings by codifying what is allowable. This would give directions to educators and students to allow voluntary expression of religious and secular views.

I sincerely ask that you vote H. B. 3678 out of committee for it to be considered by the Senate. I am not promoting mandatory prayer or Bible study. I am simply asking that what is allowable be cleared up and the students feel free to do what is already allowable. H. B. 3678 will do this.

Sincerely,
David Foote

To Senator Florence Shapiro:

I would appreciate your hearing my input regarding the Texas House Bill 3678 which would open the door to school prayer and put our children in danger of being influenced by outside powerful religious groups without their chance of deciding their own path to adulthood.

This Bill is one of the scariest infiltrations into the minds of our children. The Trojan Horse could be no worse. Please hear us and help our kids maintain their innocence.

Thank you.

Stanley Perilman

Dear Senate Committee and Texas Legislature leaders,

Our daughter entered middle school concurrent with the years of Columbine and before the Santa Fe Supreme Court ruling. She was bombarded daily by demands and pressures to become a good Christian student. That would most likely be a good thing for most children. However, our family is Jewish.

Her years in middle school had religious pressure on an hourly and daily basis. And it went well beyond Prayer at the Pole and Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Being smart and savvy, our daughter created an alter persona to cope. Her teachers who understood the destructive power of loosing one's identity called us to advise us of this change which included wearing WWJD accessories and creating a made up church where she and her family belonged.

We know as parents what it means to be a "captive audience" in a school with few limits on religious expression -- in a community proud of their evangelical Christian roots. It was a harmful environment, one that we feared our daughter may not survive or learn to her potential. We found the resources to send our daughter to a school that valued her unique cultural and religious heritage -- and graduated as a National Merit Scholar with numerous college scholarships. For all of her success, it was not fair that our daughter could not attend a neighborhood public school without harassment and fear.

Consider the negative impact of this bill on Education. Particularly the mandate to create limited public forums at virtually every school event. This will only distract students from their studies. It will distract teachers from the instruction required for our students to excel. And it will cause litigation which will be a painful and financial distraction for the school district and community at large.

Or how HB 3678 may cause the loss of jobs and corporate headquarters, as Texas will not be a place that embraces new faces and new ideas.

Please vote "NO" on HB 3678. At a minimum, amend those portions that are unConstitutional which enforce mandatory open forums that will result in mayhem and lower academic standards.

Sincerely,

Mr. and Mrs. William Barzelay
4508 Alexandra Drive
Colleyville, TX 76034

After more than 20 years in Texas, I can say that it has not been easy being a Jew in a predominantly Christian community. At youth sports opening days, chamber and community events and even in the schools, prayer has been the hallmark of introductions and ceremonies. All too often, I have found myself in a room of bowed heads, trying to silently maintain my dignity and my faith. **Usually, I am at a gathering with others because we share a common cause in our community, but in an instant I am made to feel a stranger, and become an outsider.** I'm not even sure if anyone else in the room notices my struggle. In all my years in Texas, after countless invocations, no one has ever said a word to me about it.

Those who know me, know that my parents are Holocaust survivors. I was a docent and speaker for the Dallas Holocaust Museum, sat on the Grapevine-Colleyville Diversity and Religious committees, teach about the Holocaust in schools and have co written a book with my father about his experiences in 10 concentration camps. This is an issue that I feel strongly about. With the current debate about the upcoming decision on student led school prayer, it is not easy to be a voice that speaks out for the minorities. I grew up with stories of my fathers suffering during the Nazi occupation. In Poland, at the beginning of the war, my father and the few other Jewish children in his elementary school class were forced to stand in the back of the room while the Christian children recited their daily prayers. Later these same children with their parents stood by as the synagogue was burned down. Now I see my children struggle being Jewish in our Texas schools. **How can this be?**

In the arena of public prayer, there are too many who are left out and left behind when the call to worship is not one that everyone is comfortable with. Will it be to Jesus or Mohammed? Catholic? Wiccan? There is much talk of tolerance and diversity but little action to bring peace and unity. Prayer may be the answer to our worlds woes, **but not in the schools which are the places where we are trying to teach our children to live in the world with others who are different from them. Look at the world today- the path to peace must be built of bridges which accepts, respects and welcomes all people.**

Martin Buber, a famous Jewish philosopher once said that we must make sure that the path to God does not become more important than God. I recognize that prayer has become a tradition in many public meetings. I support individual religious freedom, but that also includes my own. The fact is that the most righteous judges in our highest courts wrestled with the philosophical issue of public prayer and wrote laws to ensure that all faiths would be welcome and exist equally in America. I ask that you, our leaders also remember that there should be room for everyone, of all religions, in our communities and schools. In the Bible it says to 'welcome the stranger". Well I am the stranger here and I do not feel welcome.

Dear Senator Shapiro,

No child should have to be put into a difficult situation at school due to religious beliefs. Our children are exposed to a significant religious presence at school, something they have learned to live with. There are many children (and their parents) who are kind, sincere, and open minded about topics related to religion.....there are many other children (and their parents) who are, unfortunately, judgemental, narrow minded, and at times cruel in the way they force their beliefs on to others. I know this from many incidents that our children have experienced or witnessed at our schools.

To allow a law that would place children of different faiths, other than the dominant faith, into potentially difficult positions due to religious beliefs would be unfair to the children.

Here's one example of what happens today. Our son is on the local high school freshman basketball team. A few weeks ago at their basketball banquet a speaker gave the invocation, at which he ended with the words...."all mighty thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ".

My son was sitting at a table with fellow freshman, most who had attended his Bar Mitzvah two years earlier....these guys are friends. But I could tell that my son was uncomfortable, in fact his friends were uncomfortable.....and I know for sure that my wife and I were uncomfortable.

Were there any other players or families of different faiths in attendance? In fact, yes.

Our experience with this type of situation has taught us there are generally two types of people...

1) the person is ignorant/ not aware of people of other faiths and, if were made aware, would change their actionsor... 2) the person who only cares about their faith/ agenda/ priorities and will do whatever is necessary to see there objective fulfilled.

This is a good example of what would occur if a law were passed.....and it wouldn't be an occassional occurrence, it would become a regular occurrence. Jews in Texas learn to deal with these types of situations because often they are caused by people who have never known a Jewish person. My children, and children of other faiths, should not be put into difficult situations because someone else of a dominant faith has been invited to pray at a school event.

Our children are being taught diversity and acceptance of others....why should we allow a sensitive and important issue as religion to become a tool of separation?

Please stop Bill 3678 from passing and keep religion in our places of worship and out of our schools.

Sincerely,

Concern Over House Bill 3678

I am very concerned over House Bill 3678 and the negative impact it may have on students whose religious beliefs are in the minority. It is already extremely difficult on students in schools where their religion is in the minority, and this bill has the potential for further alienating these students from the majority and making them feel left out.

As non-Christians in a predominantly Christian area, both of my boys have experienced the feeling of isolation at their public schools. Especially in the elementary schools, many school projects and literature revolves around Christian holidays. One of my boys had to get “permission” to decorate his required Christmas tree art project with Hanukkah related objects. Last year my son who was nine years old informed his music teacher that he should not have to sing Christmas songs for the winter “Holiday Music Show” if no other religions’ holiday songs were being sung. This resulted in my husband and I having to meet with the Principal of the school to resolve the situation. Although many comments are not meant to be malicious, both of my sons have been told by fellow classmates that they will go to “hell” since they do not embrace Christianity. My son who is currently in 8th grade tells me that there is even a student in one of his classes who has taken it upon himself to try and convert all non-Christians.

Students like to feel accepted and want to “fit-in”. House Bill 3678 has the potential to do the exact opposite, and has the potential to damage a child’s self-esteem. It goes against the current Texas motto of “No Child Left Behind”. It provides no benefit that does not already exist in our first amendment, and carries with it the risk of alienating students in the religious minority and increasing anti-Semitism.

Peggy Hanan
1400 Thetford Ct.
Southlake, TX 76092
817.329.1060

Dear Senator Shapiro,

I emphatically urge you to reject HB 3678 allowing prayer or religious opinions at "limited public forums", i.e. school events. As a member of a minority religion, my children have been subjected to being harrassed and ostracized by schoolmates because of their beliefs. There is already a very strong push in our community to promote a religious agenda at school by Students Standing Strong and students who don't participate are noted as different and outsiders.

The effect of this bill would be to promote the majority religion at the expense of minorities. No one should be forced to listen to religious messages at school events and to feel that their beliefs are less important or acceptable than others.

This country was founded on the separation of church and state and has always supported religious freedom. This bill moves away from these two ideals by forcing religion into the public schools and promoting one set of beliefs at the expense of others.

No one is concerned when individuals wish each other a Merry Christmas or distribute candy at holidays. However, religious beliefs should not be given a public platform at public school events.

If the legislature wants to protect appropriate religious expression by students it should insure First Amendment training for all teachers and administrators and allow time in each grade for classroom discussions of a variety of religions. Let's understand and celebrate diversity rather than support turning school events into religious forums.

Once again **I urge you to reject HB 3678 as INCONSISTENT WITH THE BEST INTERESTS OF ALL TEXAS PUBLIC SCHOOL CHILDREN** and with the **US CONSTITUTION.**

Thank you

Sincerely yours,

Robin S. Rosen
3100 Scarborough Lane W
Colleyville, TX 76034

My name is Charlie Cytron-Walker and I am the rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, near the DFW airport. I am deeply committed to my religious tradition, I pray every day, and I have a strong relationship with God. And I would strongly urge you to oppose House Bill 3678. I also have with me the written testimony of eight of my congregants who are also encouraging you to oppose this bill.

Two Jewish teachings are at the heart of my opposition. The first is that in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, we are commanded thirty six times that we should not wrong or oppress the stranger. The second is based on Genesis, chapter one, verse twenty-seven, which teaches that every human being is created in the image of God and therefore every person is infinitely valuable.

These teachings are by no means exclusive to Judaism, however, the way that some of my congregants have been treated in their communities does not reflect these ideals. The child who was invited to a pool party that turned out to be a Baptism party was not made to feel infinitely valuable. At a sports team banquet, another child felt oppressed when the team pendant turned out to be a Christian religious symbol. And the children in my congregation are wronged every time they are told that they are going to hell. These hurtful incidents are happening to children who just want to grow up as Americans and as Texans, but instead they are made to feel like strangers.

House Bill 3678 would only add to that alienation because by creating “limited public forums,” such as assemblies or football games, where a student’s religious expression would be protected. This could include student prayer or other types of religious expression that could further alienate, isolate, or exclude their peers and division and exclusion is not what our public schools should be about.

Please do not misunderstand. I have a great appreciation for the faith and traditions of my Christian brothers and sisters and I understand that it is incumbent for many to share the “Good News,” to share the Gospel with others. I just do not feel that our state should condone this practice in the public schools. And by passing this bill, regardless of how many times the bill states that the views expressed are only the student’s, the state would very much be condoning every prayer because you know as well as I do that based on the number and nature of religious Christians in Texas, that is exactly what would happen.

Again, please do not misunderstand. I strongly believe that prayer is a good thing, but when it alienates and divides our children instead of drawing us closer to God, there is a problem. I am well aware that as a Jew, I am very much in the minority, but our laws have to protect the minority, too. Please vote against House Bill 3678. Thank you.

Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker
Congregation Beth Israel
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May 16, 2007

The Honorable Florence Shapiro
Capital Office Building
Austin, Texas

Dear Senator Shapiro,

I am writing to express my concern with provisions of House Bill 3678 and its effect on the issue of school prayer.

The First Amendment to our Constitution provides all the protection that our students need in expressing their religious beliefs. There is no reason for us to legislate any additional protection or further attempt to define what can or can't be done or when. The language in this bill is nothing more than another attempt by a group known as the "religious right" to impose its beliefs on the rest of the people , believing they are the only ones who know what is best for all of us.

Our children should be taught about appropriate religious expression provided by the First Amendment to our Constitution .

We don't need to keep creating new legal issues to be litigated and waste time and money.

I ask that you help, by either killing completely or at least striking the so called "limited Public Forum " provision from this proposed legislation.

Thank you for your help with this matter.

Very truly Yours,

To whom it may concern:

Did anyone ever give thought to the fact that the "public" schools we send our children to are the only safe haven they have and where everyone is equal? Nobody is judged on their beliefs and children are free to socialize and not be scrutinized because of their beliefs or faiths. Look at the turmoil the world is in and mainly it is all due to different religious beliefs being inflicted upon everyone else. Is it necessary to start dividing everyone up in the "public" school system as well?

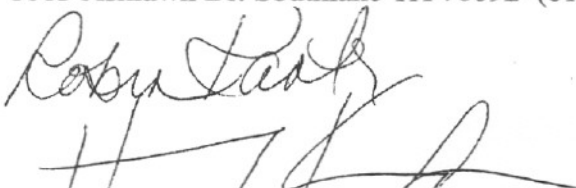
Our elementary school recently started a club called "the beach club" and they meet every Wednesday right after school for an hour and have bible study. They wear a T-shirt with a surfboard on it and carry their bibles to school. Until this started, everyone got along and all played together. Now clicks have formed and only the "Beach Club" members are welcome and the kids are becoming divided. They walk the halls singing Jesus songs and talk about all the prizes they are winning at this club. Everyone wants to go to this club now because it is on the campus and they get cool stuff. They wear fun T-shirts every Wednesday and get extra points for doing so. Needless to say ...many children are being left out and not included at lunch time where before they all played together. We are tearing the elementary children apart and forming new clicks of which we have no control over. It was bad enough we had sports to deal with and that competitive edge...now we have to deal with whose religion is better and who's right and who's wrong?

When my daughter was in 3rd grade we had a Mormon girl over and when my daughter told her we did not believe in Jesus because we were Jewish, she proceeded to tell my child she was going straight to "hell". My daughter cried for days because of this and to this day those two girls do not speak and they were great friends once. My oldest daughter in high school has been told that some of the boys would not date her because she was Jewish. That was very painful to hear as a teenager and that is just some of what we have to deal with even without religion being brought into the schools.

If we bring prayer into the schools we will divide, separate, segregate and even worse prejudice our children towards one another based on their individual beliefs. Religion is a wonderful thing and should not be taken lightly. Leave it to the professionals to properly distribute religious materials to our children if one wishes that for their families. These kids have enough to deal with trying to fit in where everything is supposed to be perfect.

The Separation of Church and State act was adopted for a reason and should be left alone. Public is just that....a place where everyone is equal. Religion is already formed and taught and belongs in the proper house of worship. The world is a mess and we have enough going on in the schools trying to get help for our children to pass their classes, please don't add one more obstacle for them to deal with!!!!

Robin and Harvey Kanter
1013 Ashlawn Dr. Southlake TX 76092 (817) 251-1825

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The top signature is cursive and appears to read 'Robin Kanter'. The bottom signature is also cursive and appears to read 'Harvey Kanter'.