

April 23, 2026

*Submitted via email*

Senator Mark Pody  
Tennessee General Assembly  
425 Rep. John Lewis Way N.  
Suite 754, Cordell Hull Bldg.  
Nashville, TN 37243

Re: Call to Reject HB 47

Dear Senator Pody:

The Center for Inquiry (CFI) writes to urge your conference committee to vote against HB 47. This bill would authorize posting the Ten Commandments, a purely religious document, in Tennessee's public schools in violation of the First Amendment.

CFI is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing science, reason, and secularism in American law and policy. We have numerous supporters in Tennessee.

#### Problematic Elements of the Bill

HB 47 provides that local boards of education “may allow” public schools in Tennessee to display the Ten Commandments, the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, the Constitution of Tennessee, the Bill of Rights, and “other historically significant documents in a prominent location in each school building in order to educate students on the historical significance and common cultural heritage the documents have.”

Under HB 47, a prominent location “means a school entryway, cafeteria, or common area where students are likely to see the display.”

#### CFI's Analysis

**CFI opposes this legislation because promoting particular religious beliefs in a public school in this manner is a fundamental violation of the First Amendment's Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses.** In addition, HB 47 runs afoul of Article I, Section 3 of the Tennessee Constitution, which declares that “no preference shall ever be given, by law, to any religious establishment or mode of worship.”<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the other historical documents authorized by HB 47, the Ten Commandments are a purely religious document, and displaying them in schools places the state's imprimatur on a sectarian religious message. The U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://publications.tnsosfiles.com/pub/2023%20TN%20Constitution.pdf>



the other historical documents listed under this bill can educate students about the “historical significance and common cultural heritage” we share as Americans. However, far from achieving this laudable objective, prominently displaying the Ten Commandments can only cause religious division and make students who do not subscribe to faiths that venerate the text subject to religious coercion in their own schools.

**In *Mahmoud v. Taylor* (2025), the U.S. Supreme Court strongly recognized the right of parents to direct the religious upbringing of their children.** As part of its analysis under the First Amendment’s Free Exercise Clause, the Court observed that “for many people of faith across the country, there are few religious acts more important than the religious education of their children.” This right does not simply exist “in the confines of one’s own home,” and it would be “an empty promise if it did not follow those children into the public school classroom.”

Ultimately, the Supreme Court’s decision in *Mahmoud* rejected the “chilling vision of the power of the state to strip away the critical right of parents to guide the religious development of their children.”

And so it is that, with respect to HB 47, the display of the Ten Commandments in Tennessee’s public schools would impinge on the right of parents to bring up their children in any number of religious faiths (or no faith at all.) The way the Ten Commandments will be prominently displayed communicates government approval of its directives, including that the reader shall have no other gods except the one in the Bible. Impressionable young students are essentially a captive audience during the school day. Yet the legislation was written to make the posting impossible for students to ignore.

**CFI is far from alone in raising these concerns.** The organization United Volunteers of Tennessee states that this bill “would infringe on parents’ and families’ long-settled constitutional rights to guide their children’s religious development.”<sup>2</sup> Likewise, a Tennessee pastor, Rick Roberts, penned an op-ed in response in *The Tennessean* titled, “Ten Commandments are important but should not be displayed in Tennessee schools.”<sup>3</sup>

Going beyond the local level, national organizations have joined the chorus against HB 47. In a March 13 letter to the Tennessee legislature, Interfaith Alliance, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, and the National Council of Jewish Women expressed their opposition to this legislation and argued: “The responsibility for religious education belongs to families, houses of worship and other religious institutions – not the government. The government oversteps its authority when it authorizes the display of religious texts.”<sup>4</sup>

**More than 70 religious leaders from Tennessee joined the March 13 coalition letter, a sign of how badly HB 47 misses the mark and how strongly religious leaders in your own state oppose the bill.** The letter concludes: “We should not turn public schools into Sunday

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<sup>2</sup> <https://tennesseelookout.com/2026/02/16/ten-commandments-could-go-up-in-tennessee-public-schools>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/contributors/2025/02/11/tennessee-legislature-ten-commandments-schools/78289707007>

<sup>4</sup> <https://baptistnews.com/article/tennessee-joins-the-fray-on-ten-commandments-law>



schools. We remain steadfast and united in affirming the values of religious freedom that are foundational to our democracy and will continue to push back against attempts to impose a singular religious viewpoint into our public institutions.”<sup>5</sup>

CFI is proud to stand with the many voices, both local and national, that oppose this legislation.

Conclusion

For the reasons provided in this testimony, CFI urges the conference committee to reject HB 47. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Azhar Majeed  
Director of Government Affairs and Policy

cc:  
Members, Conference Committee

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<sup>5</sup> <https://tn-ten-commandments-faith-leader-sign-on-pdf.tiny.site>