

Ohio bill would require daily moment of silence in public schools

By **Laura Hancock**
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COLUMBUS, Ohio - An Ohio House bill would change state law that allows public schools to provide a moment of silence each day to requiring one.

[House Bill 187](#) is sponsored by state Reps. Gary Click, a Sandusky County Republican who was a Christian pastor for 30 years, and Eric Synenberg, a Beachwood Democrat and member of the legislature's Ohio Jewish Caucus.

[State law says](#) the moment of silence is "for prayer, reflection or meditation upon a moral, philosophical, or patriotic theme." Whether HB 187 would push more God in public schools depends on how teachers implement it, according to a separation of church and state advocate.

HB 187 applies to traditional K-12 public school districts that are run by boards of education. It is silent on whether charter schools would be included in the requirement. Private schools, many of which are affiliated with faith organizations, are not included in the bill.

Click and Synenberg distanced themselves from the prayer part of the moment of silence during testimony in the House Education Committee. They instead emphasized the mental health benefits of meditation and mindfulness.

"This bill does not have any religious goal in mind," Synenberg said. "We want to give every student an opportunity for personal reflection, mindfulness, or quiet contemplation regardless of religious belief or background."

Click noted that the rush to get out the door and catch the morning bus to get to school on time can be stressful in a busy society. Meditation lowers cortisol levels, and enhances emotional resilience, memory and cognitive function, he said.

"This bill does not ask for much and is extremely non-prescriptive," Click said. "It does not say where, when or how long. It just says simply a 'moment.'"

But Nik Nartowicz, lead policy counsel at Washington-based Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, said that Ohio students come from a variety of

religious backgrounds. Many families also choose not to engage in prayer. The Constitution protects students from all these backgrounds.

“If a school just says, ‘OK, we are having a moment of silence,’ that’s one thing,” Nartowicz said. “But if the school says, ‘Well, the law says we have to have a moment of silence for prayer, reflection or meditation,’ when you say the word ‘prayer’ students are going to feel that they need to pray.”

This is especially true for students in young grades, he said.

“Think of a first-grade student whose teacher tells them, ‘OK, we’re in a moment of silence where you can pray, reflect or meditate.’ They’re going to take that as, ‘Now I have to pray during this moment of silence.’ When kids are young, they’re impressionable. The teachers have power over that, especially if the teacher themselves is praying.”

Nartowicz is skeptical of Click sponsoring the bill. Click sponsored last year’s bill for released time for religious instruction, requiring all school districts to pass policies to allow students to leave class in the middle of the day to attend religious instruction off campus. [The legislation passed](#) after it was combined with another bill during the final hours of last year’s legislative session.

The released time bill came as the Christian-based LifeWise Academy, [headquartered in the Columbus suburbs](#), is expanding released time programs throughout the state and country. Click maintains any faith organization can establish a released-time program, and [a Satanic Temple released-time program](#), which teaches students humanism, began in Union County.

Click also sponsored the bill, [currently being challenged in court](#), that seeks to prohibit puberty blockers and hormones for transgender Ohioans under age 18. He said there was no religious motivation for that bill but [a journalist found a sermon](#) from around 2019 in which he denied that God would allow someone to be born in the wrong body.

“So you have to look at the source,” Nartowicz said.