



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

January 12, 2026

The Honorable Rep. Kristin Noble
Chair, Education and Policy Administration Committee
107 North Main Street
Concord, New Hampshire 03301

Re: OPPOSE HB 1628, Undermining Local Control and Quality of Public Education

Dear Chairperson Noble and Members of the Education and Policy Administration Committee:

American Atheists, on behalf of its constituents in New Hampshire, writes in opposition to HB 1628, a bill which would mandate that every public school excuse students to attend religious released time courses. Proponents of released time argue that this program accommodates an individual student's religious practice during school time, but more often these programs are used by religious groups to pressure and proselytize to students during the school day. This legislation is harmful to atheist and religious minority students, who may be targeted by other students or religious groups and subject to bullying and harassment. Moreover, released time distracts from the efforts of public schools to prioritize quality education, evidence-based practices, and student degree completion. We strongly urge you to oppose this unconstitutional and harmful bill.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the "wall of separation" between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheists are accepted as members of our nation's communities and where bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building, and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. American Atheists believes that no young person should be subject to religious coercion by the government or harassment by their peers.

AMERICAN ATHEISTS

225 Cristiani Street • Cranford, NJ 07016-3214
(908) 276-7300 • www.atheists.org

Released time programs have frequently faced First Amendment challenges because they promote religion in public schools. As the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Zorach v. Clauson*,¹ school districts are able to create policies that allow students to receive religious instruction during public school time, as long as they are off campus, students have parental permission, and they are conducted without government aid. This ruling was intended to accommodate the religious freedom of parents and their children. While the intention is to make accommodation while preserving the separation of religion and government, in recent years religious groups have exploited and expanded these released time programs to gain additional access to public school students, in order to engage in proselytization and religious indoctrination during the school day.

HB 1628 represents an enormous expansion of these programs by undermining local control and overriding school districts' decisions about whether to allow released time. Instead of relying on locally elected school boards to make decisions best suited for the needs of their communities and schools, HB 1628 would impose a one-size-fits-all mandate on every public school in New Hampshire, forcing districts to spend valuable school time and resources implementing this program to the detriment of all students' education. This will leave more students vulnerable to religious coercion during school hours, and it will harm public education across the state.

The bill allows up to one hour per day of released time, which, for a typical eight-hour school day, accounts for 12.5% of the time students spend in school. Schools cannot continue to provide mandatory education during this time — meaning students who leave campus for religious instruction will miss out on important, substantive courses. Over a typical, 180-day school year, released time students would be absent for 22.5 school days or nearly a full month of lost learning as compared to their peers.

Perhaps most concerning, HB 1628 has no safeguards to prevent the religious coercion of students. Too often, the stated purpose of these programs is to pressure “unchurched” students to conform to dominant religious beliefs.² For example, School Ministries claims that “50% to 70% of youth entering this program are unchurched when they enter the program,” and that, “Released Time Bible

¹ *Zorach v. Clauson*, 343 U.S. 306 (1952).

² See Bindewald, B.J. (2014). Public School Credits for Devotional Courses on Religion: The Evangelical Reconceptualization of Released Time. Clemson University, Dissertations.

Education not only increases the biblical knowledge of children already going to church, it can reach our unchurched youth in extraordinary ways.”³

The programs rely on other students to “minister” to their peers, that is, to proselytize and pressure atheist and religious minority students to attend. Research indicates that nearly one in three (29.4%) nonreligious people report that they faced harassment, discrimination, and other negative experiences in school because of their beliefs.⁴ It is an unacceptable betrayal of the principle of religious freedom for lawmakers to force schools to allow this coercive and harmful behavior.

Between this bill’s implied endorsement of religion and the harassment of students it will foster, HB 1628 would create substantial risk of liability for school districts. Taxpayer dollars should fund public education, not be wasted on efforts to defend religiously coercive mandates in court.

It is clear HB 1628 is not about safeguarding students’ religious freedom — in fact, it undermines that goal. Instead, this bill would harm educational outcomes, improperly promote religion in public schools, foster religious coercion of students, and place schools in dangerous and expensive legal territory. We strongly urge you to reject this bill. Should you have any questions regarding American Atheists’ opposition to HB 1628, please contact me at vanderson@atheists.org.

Sincerely,



Victoria Anderson
State Policy Specialist
American Atheists

³ School Ministries. *Tales of Grace in a Time of Violence*, p. 8.

⁴ American Atheists. Data from the U.S. Secular Survey (2019), a survey of nearly 34,000 nonreligious people, not yet published.