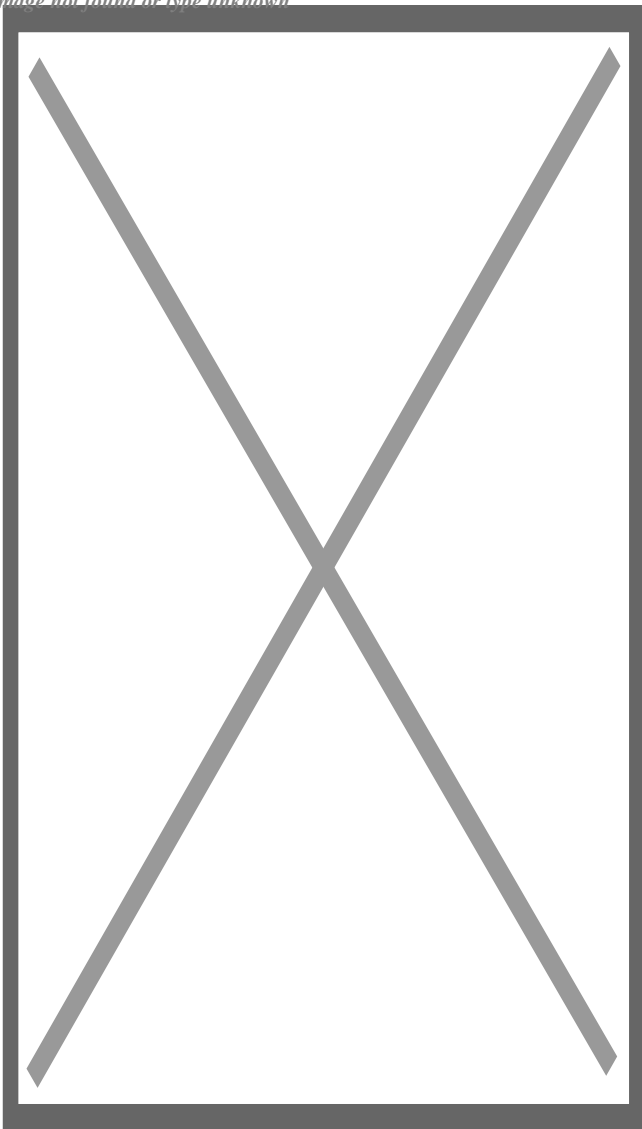


Iowa Republicans forward bill to force students to stand for national anthem

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Iowa City, January 31 (RHC)-- Republicans in a state legislative subcommittee in Iowa forwarded a bill last week to force students to stand for and “respect” the singing of the Star Spangled Banner each day, a move that critics say would violate the free speech rights of children.

House Study Bill 587, sponsored by state Rep. Skyler Wheeler (R), modifies the state’s social studies curriculum to include instruction on “how to love, honor, and respect” the national anthem. It also mandates that “all teachers and students who are physically able shall stand at attention and remove any headdress that is not being worn for religious purposes” during the anthem.

Under the bill, students who don’t want to sing would be forced to stand and maintain a “respectful silence” during the daily ritual.

Last Wednesday, two Republicans on the three-member subcommittee considering the bill voted to forward it to the state legislature. State Rep. Sue Cahill, a Democrat who is opposed to the bill, sang the anthem during her closing remarks of the subcommittee meeting, saying that while she isn’t opposed to displays of patriotism, she doesn’t believe students should be required to participate.

“Our Capitol is the perfect place to show patriotism,” Cahill said. “[But] I think that’s something students choose and it’s something that they learn and they’ll learn it in other ways.”

Though opposition to singing and/or standing for the national anthem has existed throughout U.S. history, acts of protest against the anthem became more prominent following uprisings against the police killing of George Floyd in 2020. Critics of the anthem, which was written by lawyer Francis Scott Key in 1814, noted that it includes a verse chastising enslaved Black people for siding with the British during the War of 1812 after being promised their freedom for doing so.

That verse reads:

No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave,
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

The bill doesn’t require that verse to be sung each day, but would require all verses to be sung at “patriotic occasions,” during which students would be forced to stand regardless of their views on the verse.

Beyond its references to slavery, the national anthem has faced backlash for glorifying U.S. militarism, specifically the line that references “bombs bursting in air.”

“U.S. bombs don’t burst in air, they burst in homes, hospitals, schools, cities, and villages, murdering men, women, and children,” Palestinian American poet and organizer Remi Keanazi wrote on X in 2018. “The national anthem is a symbol of violence and jingoism.”

Critics blasted the Iowa bill for violating the rights of students who didn’t want to participate.

“While — putting on my personal hat — I’m not crazy when people decide to kneel or sit for the national anthem, I one hundred percent respect their Constitutional right to do so,” said Damian Thompson, a lobbyist for Iowa Safe Schools, an organization that promotes rights and protections for LGBTQ students in the state. “And by mandating that they stand, our students’ First Amendment rights would be violated.”

Other social media users noted that Iowa lawmakers should prioritize the material conditions of their constituents.

“We have polluted waterways, some of the highest cancer rates in the country, bridges that are at the end of their lifespans, lack of rural healthcare, but our legislature is worried about making kids sing the national anthem...why do we elect these kinds of people?” a coach at an Iowa high school wrote on X.

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