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New law draws joy,  
wrath — and lawsuits



Montgomery County groups including Love Heals Youth, Liberty Library Project, Lake Conroe Area Republican Women and Liberty Belles Republican Women presented Ten Commandment posters to Willis ISD on July 9.

Courtesy of Love Heals Youth

Ten Commandments in schools bill faces August court battle

By Haajrah Gilani  
STAFF WRITER

The culture of inclusivity at Alief Early College High School is part of the daily routine rising senior Azeemah Sadiq attributes to changing her life for the better.

As a Muslim student, she has learned about other faiths through her peers and discovered a passion for advocating for religious freedom in a district often recognized for its diversity.

But she worries that the all-encompassing environment will fade come September, when she has to sit in classrooms where the Ten Com-



Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman

The Ten Commandments monument at the Capitol in Austin. SB10 says schools must hang posters of the commandments.

mandments will be displayed — guiding principles from a faith that isn't hers.

"That would have a detrimental (or) adverse effect on many students' well-being," Sadiq said. "And even mine as well."

It's mandated under Senate Bill 10, authored by Republican state Sen. Phil King of Weatherford and passed at the tail-end of the regular session. The legislation, which is being challenged in the courts, instructs schools to hang the commandments on a poster or framed copy legible from anywhere in the room without any additional content.

Schools continues on A11

AG bill  
vote not  
an ethics  
conflict

Measure expands  
powers of office  
senators are seeking

By Taylor Goldenstein  
AUSTIN BUREAU

The Texas Senate is expected to vote this week on a bill that would dramatically expand the power of the state's attorney general to prosecute election crimes.

Three of the people casting votes on Senate Bill 11, a priority of Republican Gov. Greg Abbott, are running for that statewide office: Sens. Joan Huffman, R-Houston; Nathan Johnson, D-Dallas; and Mayes Middleton, R-Galveston. The seat is up for grabs in next year's election after Attorney General Ken Paxton announced he would mount a primary challenge against U.S. Sen. John Cornyn.

While it's certainly an unusual situation, legal experts

Senators continues on A3

Cruz bill  
uses RICO  
on protest  
groups

Rioting would be  
added to the list of  
organized crimes

By James Osborne  
WASHINGTON BUREAU

Activist groups that fund and organize protests could be targeted by federal law enforcement under the same statute used to go after organized crime if U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz gets his way.

The Texas Republican introduced a bill last week that adds "rioting" to the list of activities included in the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations or RICO Act, which prosecutors use to charge large groups of people connected to a criminal activity.

On the heels of ongoing protests against work site raids by

Rioters continues on A11

Conroe native McCollum joins TxDOT speeding campaign

By Sondra Hernandez  
STAFF WRITER

Conroe-born singer and songwriter Parker McCollum is part of a new Texas Department of Transportation campaign urging drivers to slow down on roadways across the state.

TxDOT's "Be Safe. Drive Smart" campaign features McCollum in the passenger seat of a car urging a man not to speed, with an original song to the tune of his "What Kind of Man" release.

"Speeding is not an accident, it's a choice," TxDOT Executive Director Marc Williams said in

a news release. "When you choose to drive even just a little over the speed limit, you're not only risking your own life, you're risking the lives of every other person on the road with you and that's not being a good Texan."

In 2024, speeding contributed to 1,467 deaths on Texas roads and was the top factor in crashes, according to data in the release.

The man gets into the car surprised to find McCollum in the passenger seat.

He is strumming a guitar while singing "You've been driving way too fast, and I've been

thinking that you need to slow down" and "Remember, all summer long, please nobody speed."

The man agrees not to speed and asks McCollum to sign his dashboard to which the singer replies "Yeah, I've signed weirder than that!"

TxDOT is also partnering with Texas law enforcement agencies for the Operation Slowdown campaign, which continues through Sunday.

The effort has put more officers on Texas roads during the two week campaign that launched July 18 to discourage speeding.

McCollum continues on A11



Texas Department of Transportation

Parker McCollum encourages a man to drive safely with an original song to the tune of "What Kind of Man."





# SCHOOLS

From page A1

Senate Bill 10 followed an unsuccessful iteration of the bill King filed in 2023. Gov. Greg Abbott announced he signed the bill last month, despite a federal appeals court upholding a 2024 block for a similar Louisiana law the day prior.

Advocates of the bill say the Ten Commandments' place in the schools is simple: it contains moral teachings embedded in the "Texas and American story." Students should know right from wrong, they say. "This legislation is in accord with the history and traditions of our state and nation," King wrote in a statement when he filed the bill this year. "It will help ensure our students understand and appreciate the role of the Ten Commandments in our heritage, our system of law, and their impact throughout Western Civilization."

Opponents see it as a more complex issue — raising varying concerns, including that it overrides parental ability to educate their children on religion, excludes those who adhere to different faith practices and, for some, signals a rise in Christian nationalism.

That's why 16 Texas families joined a lawsuit earlier this month to block Senate Bill 10 from going into effect this fall.

The complaint detailed stories of the families across various faith groups taking action, including Joshua Fixler of Houston, who practices Judaism and filed on behalf of himself and his three children. As a rabbi and parent, he holds multiple rationales for why he opposes the legislation — like not wanting anyone outside of his family to explain "adultery," which is mentioned in one of the commandments.

For Fixler, it's also about the fact that the text mandated by the bill differs from Jewish understandings of the Ten Commandments, which the lawsuit says would interfere with his children's religious development and send the message "that this Christian version of the Ten Commandments is author-



Brett Coomer/Houston Chronicle file photo

**Principal Rania Khalil tours a temporary classroom at Benavidez Elementary School last year. Schools have been instructed to put up posters of the Ten Commandments in all classrooms.**

itative, that all classrooms and school facilities are Christian spaces."

"Posting a Protestant version of the Ten Commandments in every classroom is the equivalent of hanging a neon sign that flashes 'non-Christians not welcome,'" said Heather Weaver, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union on the case.

Weaver, who serves as senior counsel for the ACLU's program on freedom of religion and belief, said she has seen a trend of legislation involving bills "advanced by religious extremists who do want to impose a particular brand of Christianity on everyone else." Bills that incorporated the Ten Commandments into public schools were pushed in several states this year, though the majority of those attempts failed.

The case will have its motion hearing for a preliminary injunction next month before a U.S. district judge in San Antonio.

David Sincere Jr., the pastor of Fort Bend Transformation Church, is working to start a local chapter of Christians Against Christian Nationalism; the broader campaign began in 2019 and de-

fines 'Christian nationalism' as "a political ideology that seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America's constitutional democracy."

As Sincere is engaging in conversations with multiple organizers aiming to understand and address Christian nationalism, he's envisioning a future of a more united country, an environment that is welcoming to his area's diverse religious beliefs. Senate Bill 10 doesn't fit into that vision.

"Certain people think that not having a Christian moral foundation is actually a threat to our society as a whole," Sincere said. "So they're like 'If you don't believe like us, then you're a problem.'"

He said he opposes the legislation for its exclusionary nature and because it strips an educational responsibility from parents.

"I've raised three kids. They're all adults now," Sincere said. "I don't want somebody else teaching my kids about religion in school because your value system, your religious system, your principles, may be different than mine."

The poster must be at least 16 inches wide and 20 inches tall to comply with the law. If a classroom doesn't have the necessary copy of the Ten Commandments hanging, the school must accept a private donation that meets the requirements or it is eligible to use district funds to purchase it.

Through volunteers like Rebecca Smith, obtaining a Ten Commandments poster is becoming easier. She runs a Christian nonprofit called Love Heals Youth that focuses on counseling for foster care youth, and through that, she has joined a community-led initiative to ensure the bill's success. The effort aims for every classroom in Montgomery County to have coverage, and for the excess money to go to Bible donations in school libraries.

Politics haven't played much of a role in Smith's education as a counselor over the years, but she has been looking for ways to change the child welfare system. When she saw the legislation adding the Ten Commandments into schools, she thought of the kids she works with and their curiosity about scripture.

"One thing that I've seen with the kids that we work with is that they are really thirsty for something," Smith said. "Most of them have been involved to some extent on a religious aspect, but I see what a difference it makes for them to have some sort of values."

Smith said the effort is currently at its halfway mark, with 5,000 posters in production expected to arrive shortly. While she's excited about the law, she wouldn't want any teachers to feel obligated to do any instructing on the commandments beyond putting the posters up.

"Not everybody is going to fall in line with Christianity," Smith said. "The beautiful thing is that the majority of the things you're going to see in the Ten Commandments is stuff that I would consider basic moral standards to

live by."

She also recognizes the concern some parents, like Fixler, have about children asking what "adultery" is. She knows she would like to be the one to answer that question for her own children.

"A teacher could say 'That is a great question, and I think it's best for you to ask your parents so that you can hear their explanation and their words, so let's write down your questions so that you can remember to ask them whenever you get home,'" Smith said. "That's one way they could relieve the diversity that's within the school and not impose values that maybe are not part of their family."

Opponents of Senate Bill 10 are also fighting to keep schools nonreligious.

Wil Jedy advocates for secularism, which has led him to embrace quite a few titles, including state director for American Atheists and founder of Secular Houston.

"Just in discussions with different people in the real world, a lot of them will say 'it's the Ten Commandments. What's the big deal? Kids need direction,'" Jedy said. "But again, this is the government imposing religion and a preferred sect of religion onto kids."

## CORRECTION

Beaumont, Midland and Wichita Falls ISDs are not yet at risk of state intervention after the release of the 2023 accountability ratings. A story that appeared on Page A1 of Tuesday's edition incorrectly identified the status of those districts.

### Wanda Carlene Williams Willis



Wanda Carlene Williams Willis, of Groesbeck, Texas, beloved daughter, sister, wife, mother, aunt, and great aunt passed away on July 23rd, 2025. Carlene was born in Conroe, Texas on July 13th, 1943 to Carlton Williams and Claudine Martin Williams.

Carlene attended Conroe High School in Conroe, Texas, then attended Sam Houston State University receiving a Bachelor of Science degree in History and English. After college, Carlene worked as an English teacher and eventually joined and retired from the US Government Forest Service. During her retirement, Carlene became an avid gardener and amateur genealogist, growing beautiful flowers and vegetables, feeding the many birds at her home, tracking families back over the generations, and spending time with her family and friends. She was an active member, and held multiple offices, in the Daughters of the American Revolution, Daughters of the Republic of Texas and United Daughters of the Confederacy.

Carlene is preceded in death by her parents, and grandparents William Edgar and Eula Matthews Williams and William Crockett and Lois Pressley Martin, younger sister Jackie P. Williams Sisco Cook, younger brother Martin C. Williams.

Carlene is survived by her husband Archie P. Willis; her daughter Shauna Lynn Willis; her brother William E. Williams and his wife Cheryl; her nieces Kimberly Sisco, Holley Herzog, Ashleigh Williams, Katrina Williams and nephews Joshua Williams, Jacob Williams and grandnieces Madison Bynum, Annie Williams Thurman and Bella Williams Thurman and Bella Williams Thurman and grandnephew Connor Bynum.

A Celebration of Life will be held at a future date. A family graveside will be held in her honor at County Line Cemetery, Coldspring, Texas at a later date.

# MCCOLLUM

From page A1

McCollum grew up in Conroe and still returns often to visit family members here. He is a 2011 graduate of The Woodlands College Park High School in South Montgomery County.

He has been a Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo headliner three times, most recently in March. McCollum is also on tour in support of his self-titled album "Parker McCollum," which came out June 27.



**Conroe-born singer/songwriter Parker McCollum is part of a new TxDOT campaign urging drivers to slow down.**

Texas Department of Transportation

# RIOTERS

From page A1

Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, some of which resulted in physical clashes with police in Los Angeles, Cruz's legislation is viewed as a means to go after groups who fund and organize similar protests.

"Today's organized riots against Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and Trump enforcement actions are not spontaneous unfunded actions by local actors—and they should not be treated as such," Charles Stimson, a senior advisor at the conservative Heritage Foundation, wrote in an op-ed Sunday. "As opposed to charging individuals with violations of the riot act, (under the bill) the government will be able to charge the organizers, funders, and logistical supporters of rioters as a



Ricardo B. Brazziell, Austin American-Statesman

**U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz has filed a bill that adds 'rioting' to activities included in a law used to prosecute organized crime. Cruz says the law would not apply to 'peaceful protest.'**

group for violating RICO."

Cruz says the change in law would not apply to "peaceful protest" but would rather go after "domestic NGOs and foreign adversaries" that use "riots in the United States to undermine the security and prosperity of Americans."

"My legislation will give the Department of Justice the tools it needs to hold them accountable," he said.

Six Senate Republicans including John Cornyn, of Texas, Josh Hawley of Missouri and Thom Tillis of North Carolina have signed on to the legislation

as co-sponsors.

The American Civil Liberties Union and 50501, the group that organized the ICE protests, did not respond to requests for comment about the proposal.

Federal law defines rioting as "a public disturbance involving acts of violence." If Cruz's bill became law, it would allow the Justice Department to charge not just rioters but the leaders of activist groups that organize protests, should violence occur.

Cruz, along with President Donald Trump and other Republicans, have praised the protestors that stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021 and attacked Capitol police as "patriots." He had earlier labeled the insurrection as a "violent terrorist attack" but backed off that assessment in 2022 following criticisms from conservatives including television host Tucker Carlson.

### Katherine Louise Copeland

1950 ~ 2025



In Loving Memory of Katherine Louise Copeland December 28, 1950 - July 26, 2025

Katherine Louise Copeland, age 74, passed away peacefully on Saturday, July 26, 2025, at her home in Trinity, Texas. A devoted mother, beloved grandmother, and cherished great-grandmother, Katherine leaves behind a legacy of love, resilience, and family devotion.

She is preceded in death by her dear siblings, Lynette "Bobo" Powell and Nick Stephenson. Katherine's memory lives on through her children: Kristie Copeland; Stephen Copeland and his wife, Patricia; and Scott Copeland and his wife, Linda Sue. Her light continues through her grandchildren: Billie Copeland, Danielle Copeland, James Copeland, Steven Copeland, and Austin Copeland. She was also blessed with great-grandchildren Serina, Madison, Zoey, Colton, Adrian Silas, and Steven Michael, each of whom brought immense joy to her life.

Family and friends are invited to gather in remembrance during visitation on Friday, August 1, from 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. at Metcalf Funeral Directors. A funeral service celebrating Katherine's life will be held on Saturday, August 2, at 10:00 a.m., also at Metcalf Funeral Directors. Interment will follow at Conroe Memorial Park Cemetery.

Katherine's warmth, laughter, and boundless love will be deeply missed and forever remembered.

**Metcalf Funeral Directors**  
1801 E White Oak Terrace  
Conroe, Texas 77304  
936-756-3111  
www.metcalfFuneralDirectors.com