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'A preferred sect of religion:' Houstonians react to Texas' new Ten Commandments school law

By **Haajrah Gilani**, Staff Writer

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 Gift Article



The Ten Commandments Monument at the Capitol in Austin, Wednesday, June 25, 2025.

Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman



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'A preferred sect of religion:' Houstonians react to Texas' new Ten Commandments school law

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

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“That would have a detrimental (or) adverse effect on many students' wellbeing,” 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.

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.

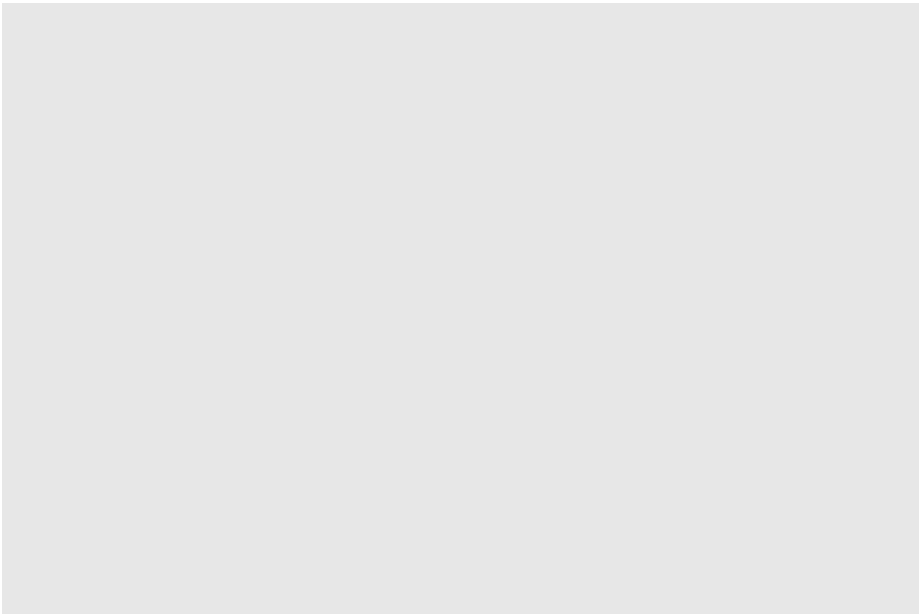
Advocates of the bill say the Ten Commandments' place in the schools is simple: it contains moral teachings embedded in the “Texas and American story.” Students should know right from wrong, they say.

“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.”

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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, in some instances, signals a rise in Christian nationalism.



Principal Rania Khalil shows a temporary classroom while giving a tour at Benavidez Elementary School on Thursday, Oct. 3, 2024 in Houston.

Brett Coomer/Staff photographer

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.

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

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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.

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“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.”

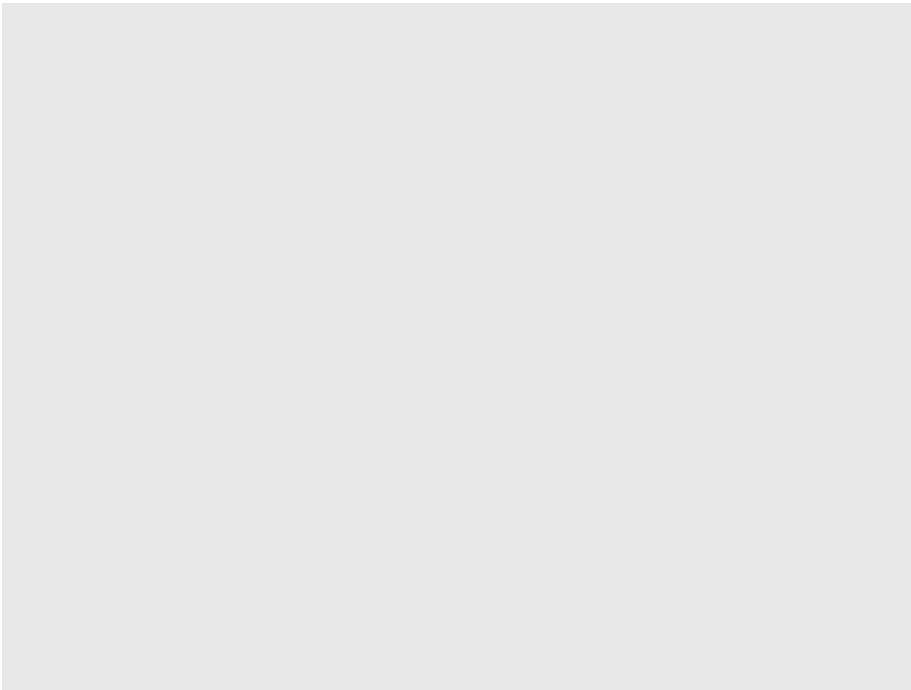
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The poster must be at least 16 inches wide and 20 inches tall to comply with the law. If a classroom doesn't have the necessary copy of the Ten Commandments hanging, the school must accept a private donation that meets the requirements or it is eligible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



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 July 9.

Photo courtesy Love Heals Youth

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.

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“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.”

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

Wil Jeudy 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,’” Jeudy said. “But again, this is the government imposing religion and a preferred sect of religion onto kids.”

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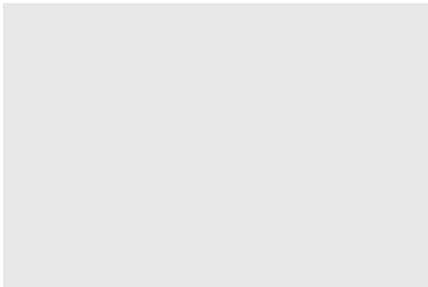


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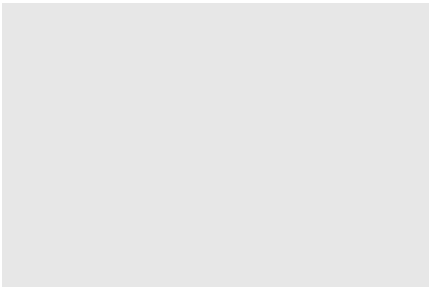
Haajrah Gilani is a religion reporter for the Houston Chronicle. Haajrah writes about the complex intersection of faith and culture in Texas. Her role is part of the Chronicle’s partnership with Report for America, an initiative of the nonprofit GroundTruth Project connecting more than 100 journalists with newsrooms across the U.S. A Philadelphia native, Gilani earned her master’s degree in journalism from Northwestern University.

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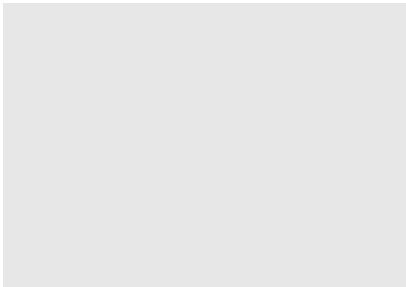
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