

South Dakota House Rejects Gov. Kristi Noem's School Prayer Bill

A Republican-dominated South Dakota House committee on Friday rejected Gov. Kristi Noem's proposal to require public schools to have a moment of silence to start the day.

The Republican governor first billed the proposal at a conservative Christian conference in Iowa last year as "putting prayer back in schools," but a House committee rejected the idea after education groups argued that voluntary prayer is already allowed in schools and the proposed law would have saddled teachers with an unclear mandate. The Republican-dominated House Education committee rejected the bill on a nine to six vote, but it could still be revived with support from one-third of House members.

"Maybe it's me, but I view prayer as something that is personal and not performative," said Republican Rep. Will Mortenson, who criticized the bill as vaguely written.

Organizations representing schools and the teacher's union asserted they had not been consulted by the governor's office on the proposal and it would have added a vague and potentially unwieldy mandate to classrooms. An aide for the governor acknowledged to the committee that Noem's office had not worked with school districts to craft the bill, but argued that 15 other states have enacted similar requirements and the moment of silence gave students an opportunity to focus before they start their day.

"This bill creates an affirmative opportunity for students to pray if they choose or to use their time quietly as they would otherwise see fit," Allen Cambon, the governor's policy advisor, told the committee. "Not only will this serve as a

valuable learning opportunity, but it's a chance to establish a sense of calm and decorum before students and teachers begin their busy day."

The bill made it clear that schools could not use the time to conduct a religious exercise. But Noem, who is running for reelection and positioning herself for a 2024 White House bid, has in the past introduced religion-inspired ideas into public schools.

In 2019, she successfully required the national motto "In God We Trust" be displayed in all public schools, sparking a national debate and drawing criticism from groups that support the separation of government from religion.

Noem's spokesman Ian Fury indicated Noem would continue to push the issue, saying she is "committed to protecting (the) First Amendment rights" of students. {eoa}

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