

Hannah Smuckler

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HB 2299 Prohibiting discriminatory practices on the basis of religion at public educational institutions

Position on Bill: Neutral

February 11, 2025

Thank you, Chairwoman and Committee. My name is Hannah Smuckler. I am here today to speak about my experience as a Jewish student in Kansas. I can only speak to the experiences my friends and I have had in Kansas public schools, and my hope is that this helps give some background as you decide how to move forward on this bill. As a student it would be nice to be involved in legislation that affects us.

I went to school in the Blue Valley District all the way from kindergarten through high school, and I am now a second-semester senior at the University of Kansas studying Journalism with a minor in Spanish.

In high school I recall a time when I was given a homework assignment which included viewing a video taken by the Nazis during the Holocaust, without provided context. I asked my instructor why viewing this video was relevant to the coursework, including that it proved to be a very difficult watch for me, and was met with an answer of "the Holocaust shouldn't bother you anymore."

During my time at KU, I have been extremely active in KU Hillel, a Jewish student organization, and have noticed a difference in the culture and security measures before and after October 7, 2023. For instance, I am no longer able to attend major Hillel events without seeing added security. Following the outbreak of the war, Hillel put a sign in its window which says "We stand with Israel." One morning in fall 2024, I was on my way to a Shabbat brunch to gather with my Jewish student community when I noticed vulgar graffiti spray-painted on the building over the sign. This made me feel uneasy as I entered the building, worried my safe space was at risk.

Additionally, in November 2023, the Jewish fraternity Alpha Epsilon Pi experienced the destruction of both an Israeli and American flag outside its house, which is across the street from KU Hillel. Seeing the Israeli flag every day when I walked to or from class or Hillel was a reminder of the community I have at KU, and when that flag was permanently removed it gave me a sense of fear and worry.

Some of my friends and I wrote in chalk in a public area on campus in the fall of 2023, which I understand is allowed by KU policy, writing the names of people who were taken hostage by Hamas that October, Jewish stars, and phrases such as "the people of Israel live" written in Hebrew, in order to spread awareness of the reality of what was happening in Israel at that time. The day after we wrote this, my friends and I noticed several students scrubbing the chalk off the ground with sponges and water. When I inquired about their actions they replied "I don't know, I was just told it was hate speech."

The last example I would like to share with you is from a course I took at KU dealing with Latin American and Spanish history. When we got to a section that included reading an antisemitic blood libel from the Spanish Inquisition, I requested that the instructor share some context about the disturbing text with the whole class. The issue was never resolved. Later in the semester, he singled me out during class, said to me "you're Judaic (sic) correct?" and proceeded to ask me to explain something about Judaism for the whole class. It made me feel targeted and uncomfortable, but of course I didn't want to upset an instructor who I had to work with for the rest of the semester.

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As a college student, seeing antisemitic incidents happen to my friends at universities around the country causes personal anxiety for me, especially when the schools don't respond. Thank you for taking the time today to discuss how to protect all students in Kansas.