

## Letter in opposition of House Bill No. 5251

Dear Chairman McNamara and Members of the House Education Committee,

I am writing today to express my opposition to House Bill No. 5251, concerning the “September 11 Classroom Moment of Silence.” I oppose this bill as a resident of Rhode Island who has a vested interest in what occurs in our public schools, but moreover, I oppose it as an educator who has an understanding of similar rhetorical gestures that have been made in the past.

As a researcher of English literature whose expertise lies in the cultural output of Western Europe from 500 to 1500, I study how dominant cultures performatively portray themselves as being under attack in order to justify attitudes of xenophobia. We see such performances in countless pieces of Christian literature from Western Europe; for instance, in the 14th-century *Prioress's Tale* by Geoffrey Chaucer, which depicts a neighborhood of Jews murdering a Christian boy on his way to school. This poem was written a century after Jewish communities were expelled from England by law, and the morbid fantasy that Christian children would be harmed for their identity was not a result of any grounded fears. Rather, a poem like this intends to leverage the human concern for the education and well-being of children in order to scaremonger listeners into vilifying out-groups as aggressors.

To legislate the recognition, even the potential recognition, of 9/11 in our public classrooms—without any attempt at a corresponding potential recognition of other tragedies of comparable magnitude—does not function to memorialize the actual dead. It instead turns the dead into a symbol in the service of xenophobia. Why highlight 9/11 in this way? We know the answer, not just from historical literature, but from the decades of insincere posturing that has spat in the face of real lives lost. The effect of a bill like this is to wield 9/11 as a symbolic weapon against the people that it seeks to marginalize. Just as 9/11 itself became the flimsy justification for the War on Terror and its horrific consequences, continued overemphasis on 9/11 is a rhetorical move to position America as a nation that has been hurt, and is therefore supposedly justified in striking back. The primary target of such a move is the Middle East, but we also know from our recent past that types of xenophobic hate are not absolutely distinct, but bleed into and feed upon each other. People who have been taught to hate those of Middle Eastern descent are quick to hate all others who they deem to be “brown”, and the inevitable endpoint of such racism is white supremacy. It may start with a moment of silence in a public classroom, but bear in mind, that silence is not innocent; it overprivileges the lives of an alleged in-group at the expense of all others, and teaches our children to look for enemies among their neighbors. I urge you to consider the impact of this bill, and thank you for your time.

Sincerely,  
Mariah Min