

LEGISLATIVE TESTIMONY ON HB 433

Good morning. My name is Rabbi Ed Stafman, of Congregation Beth Shalom in Bozeman, Montana's largest Jewish congregation. I am also speaking on behalf of MAJCO, the Montana Association of 8 Jewish communities, consisting of Jewish communities around the State. We oppose this bill which allows taxpayer dollars to be used for private religious schools.

It is with good reason that Montana's constitution prohibits state funding of religious education, as this bill would indirectly do. Public schools allow children of many different faiths and backgrounds to become friends and learn about one another's cultures and traditions, and this has led to a country with greater religious tolerance than perhaps any other in the world. This bill would encourage segregation of schools so that a child of one faith might never meet a child of another faith.

Moreover, only certain Christian groups have a sufficient population in any Montana city to sustain a school, so in reality, this bill would not give Montana taxpayer subsidies to *religious* schools, as much as it would give taxpayer subsidies only to *certain types of Christian* schools. Of course, it is possible that these subsidies could encourage other faiths to open schools here, so how will we feel about the first taxpayer subsidized madrassa teaching sharia law, maybe in Missoula or Kalispell?

As a rabbi and Jewish leader, I am particularly concerned about the potent potential for anti-semitism of this bill. Many taxpayer subsidized Christian schools would teach that the Christian Bible is the unerring, eternal word of God. That would presumably include passages where Jews are called the children of the devil; or which say that God has rejected the Jews, that Jews are obsessed with legalisms, are "hypocrites."

Thessalonians says that Jews “killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets; they displease God; they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins.” For two millennia, these words were used to heap hatred and persecution upon my people.

A properly trained minister or priest knows how to explain these potent hateful words in historical context; a teacher not trained in theology and with little public oversight does not. What does the child, told that these are the unerring and eternal words of God, do with these texts but look askance at Jews? It’s a free country and I can’t stop parents from teaching their children what they will, but not with my tax dollars, please.

On April 19, just a week away, Bozeman and other Montana cities will commemorate the Holocaust. In doing so, we will remember that the Holocaust did not begin with death camps, but was just a little ways down the slippery slope that began with laws that segregated schools and other institutions. Thank you for voting against this very bad bill.