

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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February 11, 2022

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:

bill.lee@tn.gov

The Honorable Bill Lee
Governor
State Capitol, 1st Floor
600 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.
Nashville, TN 37243

Re: Partnership with Hillsdale College to run public charter schools

Dear Governor Lee:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to your recently announced partnership with Hillsdale College to open 50 public charter schools in Tennessee. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 37,000 members across the country, including more than 400 members in Tennessee and a state chapter in Knoxville. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

We understand that you recently asked Hillsdale College, a small Christian institution in Michigan, to open 100 public charter schools in Tennessee that follow their model of civics education. It is our further understanding that the school committed to open 50 such K-12 charter schools.¹ In your recent State of the State Address, you also said that your goal in revamping state civics curricula is aimed at “informed patriotism.”²

The mission statement of Hillsdale College, a small ultra-conservative Christian college in Michigan, includes to furnish a “theological education” and maintain “by precept and example’ the immemorial teachings and practices of the Christian faith.”³ It was founded by

¹ Jackie DelPilar, *Governor Bill Lee announces new charter school partnership with private Christian college*, Fox 17 (Feb. 2022), available at [fox17.com/news/local/governor-bill-lee-announces-new-charter-school-partnership-with-private-christian-college](https://www.fox17.com/news/local/governor-bill-lee-announces-new-charter-school-partnership-with-private-christian-college).

² Abby Ann Ramsey, *Gov. Lee announces \$6M civics institute at UT to combat ‘anti-American thought,’ Daily Beacon* (Feb. 1, 2022), available at www.utdailybeacon.com/campus_news/academics/gov-lee-announces-6m-civics-institute-at-ut-to-combat-anti-american-thought/article_b8f0588c-83af-11ec-a0a0-3329895fa268.html.

³ www.hillsdale.edu/about/mission/?keyword=hillsdale%20college&matchtype=e&network=g&device=c&loc=9018948&loc2=&sc=MK720PP25&tid=kwd-55452481&gclid=CjwKCAiA6Y2QBhAtEiwAGHybPbyIkeKwaeZcxz8k0TMBkGv1qqH5az8Uz5ZfdaleHjszlcDUZiFL0RoCr9wQAvD_BwE

individuals “grateful to God for the inestimable blessings [and] . . . the perpetuity of these blessings.” It has been in the spotlight in recent years for having a connection to former Education Secretary Betsy DeVos,⁴ who was hostile to public education, as well as playing a part in rewriting Florida’s public school civics curriculum.⁵ The Hillsdale-inspired new civics standards in Florida amounted to a historically inaccurate, Christian nationalist narrative. Seventh graders, for example, were required to “recognize the influence of the Ten Commandments on establishing the rule of law in America,” which, actually, is none at all.⁶ Hillsdale’s concept of “informed patriotism” seems neither informed nor patriotic. The U.S. Constitution notably is a godless document, whose precepts are entirely secular, for instance barring any religious test for public office. There is no reference to the Ten Commandments or a deity in our foundational document. The founders were first among nations to adopt a constitution that separated religion from government, a fact, we gather, that does not get included in Hillsdale’s “1776 Curriculum.”

The Tennessee Constitution is likewise clearly violated by this proposed scheme and partnership. Art. I, § 3 guarantees that no state citizen shall be “compelled to attend, erect, or support any place of worship, or to maintain any minister against his consent; that no human authority can, in any case whatever, control or interfere with the rights of conscience; and that no preference shall ever be given by law to any religious establishment or mode of worship.”

This college’s pervasively Christian purposes render it entirely unsuitable to run Tennessee public schools. It is shocking that you would consider putting a private religious college in charge of even one public school in Tennessee, much less 50 or 100. This is a serious and unconstitutional entanglement between religion and government. It is unfortunate that Tennessee taxpayers will be on the hook when inevitable, avoidable lawsuits arise, should this ill-advised program continue.

Students who do not share Hillsdale’s particular brand of Christianity would never be comfortable attending a school run by Hillsdale. This amounts to taxpayer subsidy of religiously segregated education catering to only certain Christian families. Non-religious Americans are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification — 35 percent of Americans are non-Christians, and this includes the more than one in four

⁴ Paul Kane, *Democrats get symbolic win striking tax perk aimed at helping one influential college*, Washington Post (Dec. 1, 2017), available at www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/democrats-say-gop-tax-perk-aimed-at-helping-one-influential-conservative-college/2017/12/01/19f6c8c2-d6fe-11e7-a986-d0a9770d9a3e_story.html.

⁵ Diane Rado, *The Legislature inserted groups tied to right-wing donors into Florida’s new law on civics education*, Florida Phoenix (Aug. 22, 2019), available at floridaphoenix.com/2019/08/22/the-legislature-inserted-groups-tied-to-right-wing-donors-into-floridas-new-law-on-civics-education/.

⁶ Florida Department of Education, Proposed K-12 Civics and Government Standards (2021), available at www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/18736/urlt/CivicsGovernment.pdf.

Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.⁷ A recent survey found that 21 percent of Americans born after 1999 are atheist or agnostic.⁸

Public charter schools must not only refrain from teaching religion, but also should never be operated by religious institutions. Your arrangement with Hillsdale to open 50 schools appears to violate Tennessee law, which plainly states that “A nonpublic school, as defined in § 49-6-3001, or other private, religious, or church school, shall not establish a public charter school pursuant to this chapter.”⁹ This is especially crucial when religious institutions, like Hillsdale, have a history of falsely conflating “patriotism” with Christian nationalism. Tennessee students deserve better — a secular education that does not seek to indoctrinate in religion or a false idea of patriotism — and your decision should be reversed immediately.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-presidents
ALG/DB:rdj

⁷ Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” (Oct. 17, 2019) at <https://pewrsr.ch/2VPiFS7>.

⁸ *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.

⁹ TN ST § 49-13-106.