

Remarks to Bentonville School District

National Program Director Nick Fish

As Prepared

Members of the Bentonville School District, I would like to thank you for providing members of the public this crucial opportunity to raise issues of public importance before the community and before the Board.

As you may recall, in April 2017 the Arkansas state legislature passed a law, Act 911, that requires that school districts throughout Arkansas display the national motto in every classroom or library funded by the state. Act 911 says that if displays are donated that include the national motto (In God We Trust), the American flag centered under the motto, and the Arkansas flag, school districts are required to display them.

At the February 19 board meeting this year, Rep. Jim Dotson appeared before the board to announce a donation of nearly 900 posters to the districts' classrooms.

Today, on behalf of American Atheists and our members and supporters in Bentonville, I am pleased to make another donation to the School District. Unlike the posters donated earlier this year, however, American Atheists is committed to providing students with the full truth and historical context of our national motto. And, also unlike the posters donated by Rep. Dotson, American Atheists' posters actually comply with the requirements of Act 911.

Proponents of Act 911 claim that mandating these displays is about acknowledging our nation's 'history and heritage' in classrooms. But we think students deserve all the facts, not just a poster of an exclusionary and divisive motto devoid of any additional context or information.

So here are those facts: The motto "In God We Trust" had nothing to do with our nation's founding. According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, "In God We Trust" was first added to coins in 1864, nearly a century after the revolution, at the urging of Rev. Mark Watkinson of Pennsylvania, largely "because of the increased religious sentiment existing during the Civil War." In a letter to Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, Watkinson requested a statement be put on the nation's coinage acknowledging "Almighty God in some form" in order to "relieve us from the ignominy of heathenism." It was, from the start, a religious sentiment. Not a historical or cultural one.

During the Cold War, in an attempt to differentiate the United States from the Soviet Union, the U.S. Congress passed a joint resolution in 1956 "declaring In God We Trust the national motto of the United States," creating an official national motto for the first time.

In contrast, our nation's original motto, the thirteen letter latin phrase E Pluribus Unum, was proposed in 1776 by Thomas Jefferson as part of a design for the first seal of the United States of America. The origins of the phrase itself can be traced as far back as Cicero's 44 BC De Officiis: "When each person loves the other as much as himself, it makes one out of many."

And in today's divided political climate, and in a pluralistic community like Bentonville, people of all different religious beliefs should feel welcome and like full members of their community. That is the message we should be sending to our students. That no matter how different we are and how strongly we disagree about politics, religion, or any issue, we are united as one community and as one nation, indivisible, because we love each other as much as we love ourselves.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak on this important issue.