News



Stone tablets depicting the Ten Commandments are shown outside the Supreme Court in Washington June 27, 2005, placed there during a vigil by a religious group. A federal judge ruled Nov. 12. 2024, that Louisiana's law requiring public schools to display the Ten Commandments is unconstitutional. (OSV News/Reuters/Jason Reed)

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Louisiana's law requiring public schools to display the Ten Commandments is unconstitutional, a federal judge ruled Nov. 12.

The ruling is a setback for proponents of the measure, but not an unexpected one, as Louisiana officials anticipated legal challenges and opponents said they would sue. The U.S. Supreme Court previously struck down a similar law in Kentucky in 1980, ruling that it violated the First Amendment's establishment clause.

U.S. District Judge John deGravelles ruled the law violated court precedent and the First Amendment.

The law, deGravelles wrote in his ruling, "is coercive to students, and, for all practical purposes, they cannot opt out of viewing the Ten Commandments when they are displayed in every classroom, every day of the year, every year of their education." He further argued "there is insufficient evidence of such a broader tradition" at the time of America's founding to justify the state's law.

"There are any number of ways that they (the defendants) could advance an alleged interest in educating students about the Ten Commandments that would be less burdensome on the First Amendment," he said.

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Gov. Jeff Landry, R-La., signed the measure in June as part of the "Dream Big" Education Plan, a package of close to 20 bills, which also included scholarship accounts, the removal of COVID vaccine requirements in schools, parental consent for the use of students' preferred pronouns, teacher compensation and retirement, limitations on discussion of gender and sexuality in K-12 schools. The law required "the Ten Commandments and other historically significant documents" to be posted in some public settings including schools, according to the law's text.

Attorney General Liz Murrill of Louisiana, a Republican, indicated she planned to appeal, which could bring the lawsuit to the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, currently seen as one of the more conservative courts in the country.

In a statement, Heather L. Weaver, senior staff attorney for the ACLU's Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief, said, "This ruling should serve as a reality check for Louisiana lawmakers who want to use public schools to convert children to their preferred brand of Christianity."

"Public schools are not Sunday schools, and today's decision ensures that our clients' classrooms will remain spaces where all students, regardless of their faith, feel welcomed," Weaver said.

President-elect Trump previously praised the Louisiana law, writing on his Truth Social website in June that it "may be, in fact, the first major step in the revival of religion, which is desperately needed, in our country."