

As Mock Trial Championships Begin, Rothman Renews Call to Allow Students of All Faiths to Compete

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Congressional letter sent as 2006 competition begins without accommodations for religious students.

(Washington, DC)— On Thursday, Congressman Steve Rothman (D-NJ) led a bipartisan group of U.S. Representatives in calling on the Board of Directors of the National High School Mock Trial Championships to allow students of all faiths to participate in this annual competition without violating the practices of their religion. The 2006 championship round began yesterday morning in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. This is the first competition that has occurred since the Board voted in October 2005 not to make any future accommodations for students who observe the Sabbath on Friday and/or Saturday.

"It is not our intent that the conference should be rescheduled or even restructured in a significant way. Rather, we are looking for a statement of understanding from you that demonstrates a willingness to allow students of all faiths to compete without violating the practices of their religion," wrote Rothman and 15 other lawmakers who co-signed the letter to the Mock Trial Board of Directors. "The competition's schedule... negatively affects an increasing number of students from various religious backgrounds in the United States, including Christians, Jews, and Muslims who observe the Sabbath on Friday or Saturday."

Last year, satisfactory accommodations were made by the Board to allow students from the Torah Academy of Teaneck, New Jersey to compete without violating their religious practices. The matches involving Torah Academy, which is an orthodox Jewish school, were scheduled in such a manner that all participants were able to compete in the championships without inconveniencing any of the other student groups or disrupting the competition as a whole. However, this year the Board has refused to make such accommodations again, which has prompted two state teams to withdraw in protest, including one from New Jersey and one from North Carolina, and start their own alternative mock trial competition that does make accommodations for religious students.

In the letter, Rothman reminded the Board of his Congressional Resolution (H.Res.600), which calls on the Board to accommodate the religious beliefs of all students participating in the competition. The bill has 53 bi-partisan co-sponsors and has the support of Democratic Leadership in the House of Representatives.

"It is our hope that the Board will revisit its decision to refuse any future accommodations for students who observe the Sabbath on Friday and/or Saturday and instead, make all allowances in this and future competitions that enables all eligible students to participate, regardless of their religion," the lawmakers wrote.

A full copy of the letter and legislation is available online at: <http://rothman.house.gov/pdf/mocktrial.pdf> .

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