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133rd General Assembly

Sponsor Testimony for House Bill 164
House Primary and Secondary Education Committee
April 2nd, 2019

Chairman Blessing, Vice Chair Jones, Ranking Member Robinson and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to come before you today and present sponsor testimony on House Bill 164.

This legislation was originally championed by former Representative Bill Hayes in the 131st General Assembly where it passed through the House but did not make it out of the Senate Education committee during lame duck. Last General Assembly, I was able to get it through the Senate Education Committee, however, it once again ran out of time before making it to the Senate floor. It is my hope that by introducing the bill earlier in the General Assembly, it will have enough time to move through both chambers and to the Governor's desk for signage. The previous bills did not fail to make it into law due to their content but rather because of their timing. I can assure you that as this is solid and inclusive legislation that will positively enhance student liberties in Ohio's public schools.

House Bill 164 will simply codify into Ohio law the rights granted to students under the United States Constitution by ensuring to administrators, educators, students and parents with written clarity that a student enrolled in a public school may engage in religious expression in the same manner and to the same extent that a student is permitted to engage in secular activities. Current Ohio law already prohibits a school district's Board of Education from promoting a specific religion, or prohibiting any student from exercising his or her religious beliefs. This legislation removes the section of law allowing a school district to limit religious expression to lunch or other non-instructional time.

Under the bill, schools cannot prohibit a student from engaging in religious expression through their clothing nor in the completion of homework, artwork, or other written and oral assignments. Assignment grades and scores will still be calculated using ordinary academic standards.

H.B. 164 allows students who wish to conduct meetings for the purposes of engaging in religious expression the same access to school facilities as is given to every other secular student groups. Having access to such facilities would allow students to establish faculty-advised, student-led religious clubs that properly and freely engage in faith-related expression.

Once again, Chairman Blessing, thank you for the opportunity to offer sponsor testimony on behalf of HB 164. I would be happy to answer any questions at this time.