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Kelly Haight

Previous Leader of the Faith Group

Proponent Testimony on HB 164

House Education and Career Readiness Committee

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 proponent testimony on House Bill 164. My name is Kelly Haight.

I am a 2015 graduate of a large, central Ohio public school. I would like to share with you the obstacles that I faced during my senior year that may have been avoided if something like the Ohio Student Religious Liberties Act of 2019 had been in place.

During my senior year, I led a group called Faith. The purpose and mission of Faith was to allow high school students to share their passion of their religion, and to grow together in their faith during their high school career. We met every Thursday before school, and every Sunday off campus for a student led Bible study. During the 2014-2015 year, the club asked to be treated equal to all other student led groups at school because Faith was not in the school's yearbook, announcements, or on the club list like the other clubs were. While leading Faith, we tried to become an official club of the school, but we were denied the status due to the religious nature of the group. I also was told by school officials that Faith was being treated differently compared to other clubs because of its religious nature. I personally felt that I was manipulated, and intimidated into silence by the school during this year. As a result, I was forced to retain legal counsel to interact with the school. This led to several meetings with the building principal, district officials, and legal counsel for extended discussions of the Federal Equal Access Act.

As graduation approached, we asked to use the school's auditorium to host a Baccalaureate service for the whole district. Secular clubs were permitted to use the facility. However, because of the religious nature of the event, it was unclear to the school officials if this would be permitted, although it was completely student led and not sponsored by the school. Again, the legal counsel was forced to work with the school officials to address the Federal Equal Access Act issues at hand. I am pleased to inform you that the school ultimately allowed Faith to use the auditorium for the Baccalaureate service from the help from our legal counsel. I am also pleased to inform you that in the current school year, the school has allowed Faith to be in the yearbook, have announcements and be registered on the club list, but this was only made possible due to the assistance of the legal counsel during my school year.

In my case, after a significant commitment of my time and effort and legal counsel, it appears that the school is moving in the right direction. However, we were forced to retain counsel and endure months of uncertainty. In addition, not all public school students will have that same opportunity

to retain counsel and could be intimidated about raising their concerns with school officials. During the time that I lead Faith, we were uncertain in regards to our status and it did not appear as a student group in the yearbook, while other secular groups did. House Bill 164 will clarify appropriate treatment of student led religious groups. This will make future situations easier for school officials and all students within public schools system. I respectfully ask that you support this House Bill. It will allow a very grey area within school districts to become clear and defined. It will also make sure that future students will not have to retain counsel and endure a year long struggle to gain equal access and treatment.

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