

**4/30/19**

**Chip Weiant**

**House Speaker Appointee, Governor's Office of Faith-Based & Community Initiatives  
Advisory Board**

**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 this opportunity to present proponent testimony on House Bill 164. My name is Chip Weiant. My remarks are shaped by three perspectives:

First...I am serving my 5<sup>th</sup> term as a House Speaker appointee to the Ohio Governor's Office of Faith-Based & Community Advisory Board. I have served on the board spanning the terms of now 4 governors and have advised in policy matters relating to the Faith-Based Office and its nearly 20-year mission to uplift Ohio's Faith-Friendly culture and strengthen the Constitutionally-protected religious rights of all Ohioans, including our students.

Second...this is my 4<sup>th</sup> journey over 5 years as a key advocate for this specific bill which has included being an eye witness of the House floor passage of this proposed bill not once but twice already. I thank the bill sponsors and this chamber for your renewed resolve and this your third stalwart attempt to move this necessary bill to the Senate and to the Governor's office.

Third...I have been a practical observer for 30 years of the ever-reforming and increasingly secularized K12 Ohio public education space primarily through the lens of a Buckeye parent and now a parent and husband of 5 educators who have all been called and trained to teach our religiously diverse student population by respecting the fullness of their human dignity.

So with these three perspectives please allow me to share what I believe the bill *does not* do. The bill under consideration does not alter any interpretation of the Ohio or Federal Constitution nor create advantage or recognition for any religion nor promote nor deny distinctive practices, nor does it fundamentally alter, increase or decrease the new content of state law that directs administrators and teachers in both their Constitution-modeling responsibly or their good teaching practices. In terms of policy it is a blessing not a burden.

I would invite the committee's review of multiple legal briefings from both the national Alliance for Defending Freedom and the national Center for Law & Religious Freedom that critique this bill and fully endorses both the bill's soundness and its necessity.

What the bill *does* do is provide a single source of clarity and reference for administrators, building leaders and their legal counselors who are currently driven by a culture of haste and are inclined by default bureaucratic practice to invoke four simple words "separation of church and state" to currently deny student requests for club recognition, equal access, research topic investigation and other personal pro-social expressions of faith that are perfectly legal.

These four words are more times than not, errantly added like an old elixir in dear colleague memos and notes to parents. These four default words are rather doses of arsenic that over time have intimidated both students and their families from pressing back even gently with their concerns that an unlawful denial of

their Constitutionally protected rights likely just occurred. Talk about a chilling effect on holistic student formation; formation that is necessary to future flourishing. This must stop now in Ohio.

You all have experienced I'm sure the dismissive power of those 4 little words of "separation of church and state". While certainly apt in some circumstances that are becoming a trope that shuts down powerless students and parents.

Why is this happening? On the way to "let's all just get along" our well-meaning current local government school cultures (that often take their cue from the equally well-meaning Ohio Department of Education) are being chilled into designing non-offensive default secular freeze zones rather than free society religious liberty-reinforcing zone's that foster real-life training for diverse students.

Indeed, when I was asked to review the ODE's current Each Child framework last year I noted to the ODE chief staff editor that while the model claimed to address the "whole child" there was no space in the framework at all, no mention of respect of the students deeply held religious beliefs or that any Ohio student even possessed a "spiritual" component. I gently objected to this exclusion and offered work arounds... Nothing happened. Why, because we lack HB 164 for reference.

HB 164 clarifies that the school neither promotes nor denies the particular religious identity of any student but rather urges every student to explore and access the various faith-friendly school-supported services (like school-recognized clubs) and learn at home through their faith communities and parents' the skills of winsome personal faith expression. This approach aligns the school, with its parents and worship communities' interests and preserves and fortifies practices like release time as well as a school's right to direct and assure the flow of daily learning. This is the kind of better policy expression House Bill 164 will generate.

Neither the state, nor our beleaguered schools relish being on the receiving end of endless intimidation memos from the Freedom from Religion Foundation and other secular-agenda-promoting out-sized mischief makers who are systematically bullying schools, whole communities and even global corporations. No wonder weary administrators willingly use those *4 little words* as their first tactic to avoid some difficult discussions...that Ohioans are owed.

From my three unique perspectives...the default policy environment that has grown up these past years around our Ohio schools cannot be corrected by acquiescence and the status quo. It cannot be corrected by volunteer private or sacred sector initiative alone. It requires a state law requiring local public-school administrators to grow stronger backbones to protect Constitutional religious-personal identity. While they are doing that, HB 164 will serve as an excellent back brace and our state motto of "With God All Things Are Possible" can serve as an encouraging and correct default exhortation to cheer us all on.

Thank you.