**Sponsor Testimony for House Bill 164**

**Senate Education Committee**

**January 21st, 2020**

Chairman Lehner, Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to come before you today and present sponsor testimony on House Bill 164.

House Bill 164 doesn’t create any new rights, but will simply codify into Ohio law the rights granted to students under the Ohio Constitution and 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 of substance and relevance. This bill makes clear students will neither be rewarded or penalized based on the religious or non-religious content of their work.

H.B. 164 also 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.

Freedom of religion is one of the cornerstones of our democratic republic. HB164 is intended to protect the religious freedom of all students, regardless of their faith or beliefs. No student- be they Muslim, Jewish, Christian, atheist or agnostic-should ever feel they must surrender their rights and beliefs because they attend a public school.

Too often, lack of clear guidance for our schools has caused confusion for students, parents and teachers alike. It’s time to ensure that we protect the rights of all students, of all faiths, while giving our schools the legal guidance they need to ensure they are balancing the constitutional rights and freedoms of all students.

Once again, Chairman Lehner 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.