

February 11th, 2020

Kelly Haight

Previous Leader of the Faith Group

Proponent Testimony on HB 164

Senate Education Committee

Chairman Lehner, Vice-Chair Brenner, Ranking Minority Member Fedor, and members of the Ohio Senate Education Committee. My name is Kelly Haight and I am a **proponent** of House Bill 164. It is in my deepest regret that I could not be in attendance today.

I am a graduate of a large, central Ohio public school. During my senior year of high school, I faced multiple obstacles that may have been avoided if something similar to the Ohio Student Religious Liberties Act of 2019 that had been in place.

During my senior year, I led a group called Faith and most of the obstacles that I faced that year surrounded the group's uncertainty with the school. Faith's purpose and mission were and still are to allow teenagers to share their passion for their religion and to grow together in their faith. We gathered every Thursday before school, and we welcomed anyone to attend; As well as every Sunday off campus for a student-led Bible Study open to the entire student population of the district's three high schools. The obstacles began when we asked to be treated equally like all of the other student-led groups at the school. Other secular groups/clubs were listed in the school's yearbook, on the school's club list, had announcements, but Faith did not. With the request of equal treatment, we tried to become an official club of the school by submitting a "new club proposal" created by a principal which included the following requirements: name of 10 students who will be members of the proposed club, a proposed faculty advisor, general description of purpose of proposed club/activity, goals of proposed club/activity, 6 activities or events that students will participate in, type of areas students need to meet in, when and how often do you intend to meet, and etc. We submitted our "new club proposal" with all requirements fulfilled but we were denied due to the religious nature of the group. I was personally told by school officials in a meeting that Faith was, in fact, being treated differently because of the religious background of the group. The school officials made me feel manipulated, and intimidated into silence. As a result, I was forced to retain legal counsel to interact with the school. This led to several meetings with the building principal and district officials, and extended discussions of the Federal Equal Access Act.

As senior graduation approached, we requested access to the school's auditorium for a student-led Baccalaureate service. Secular clubs were permitted to use the facility. However,

because of the religious nature of the event, it was unclear to the school if this would be permitted, although it was not sponsored by the school. Again, my legal counsel was forced to work with the school officials to address the Federal Equal Access Act issues. With the assistance of the legal counsel, I can inform you that the school officials allowed us to utilize the auditorium for our Baccalaureate. I am also pleased to inform you that the school has allowed Faith to be in the yearbook, have announcements and be registered on the club list in recent years, but this was only made possible due to the assistance of the legal counsel during my school year.

In my situation, after a significant commitment of my time and effort, it appears that the school is moving in the right direction. However, we were forced to retain counsel and endure months of uncertainty. Counsel was forced to interact with the school. Not all public school students will have that same opportunity to retain counsel and may be intimidated about raising these issues with school officials. For the majority of my senior year, Faith was in an uncertain status but House Bill 164 will clarify the appropriate treatment of student-led religious groups. This will make future situations easier for administrators and students within public school districts. I respectfully ask that you support this House Bill. It will make sure that future students will not have to retain counsel and endure a year-long struggle to gain equal access and treatment. Thank you.

Once again Chairman Lehner, thank you for the opportunity to offer a written proponent testimony on behalf of HB 164.

