



Senator Michele Reynolds - 3rd District
Senate Bill 49 Sponsor Testimony

Chairman Bird, Vice-Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on Senate Bill 49. This legislation provides religious accommodation to students in K-12 public schools by enacting a policy for *Religious Expression Days*. Senate Bill 49 will allow students up to three excused absences per academic year to express their religion during observed religious holidays, religious activities or religious observances. The bill will require Ohio K-12 public school districts to adopt a Religious Expression Day (R.E.D.) policy.

This legislation is modeled after H.B. 353 which was enacted during the 134th General Assembly, which provided similar accommodations for students at higher education institutions. House Bill 353 permits a student to be absent for up to three days of each academic semester for religious or spiritual reasons.

Today, many students of diverse religious backgrounds in our K-12 public schools have to choose between attending school and practicing their faith. Those who are absent due to religious commitments are often marked as unexcused or otherwise academically penalized. However, Senate Bill 49 would encourage fairness and protect religious freedom. Under this bill, students who participate in a *religious expression day*, would be excused for that specific day and provided accommodation for any missed assignments including tests. In addition to making up any missed examinations or academic work for using a religious expression day, students will also be eligible to compete in interscholastic sports without penalty.

Under the R.E.D Bill, School districts will be able to develop their own R.E.D. policy which will be published at the beginning of each academic year to include a non exhaustive list of major religious holidays, festivals, and religious observances. The district shall include a statement that the list is nonexhaustive, and the list may not be used to deny accommodation to a student for a holiday or festival of the student's faith or religious or spiritual belief system that does not appear on the list. Parents and guardians will be able to submit their student's R.E.D day requests to the Principal within 14 school days of the student starting classes. The Principal shall approve not more than three written requests per school year from a student's parent or guardian for an excused absence under this policy. Nothing in this legislation, and no inclusion or exclusion of a religious holiday or festival on the list posted by a district, shall preclude a student from full and reasonable accommodations for any sincerely held religious beliefs and practices with regard to all examinations or other academic requirements.

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and religious expression. The Free Exercise Clause established in the First Amendment prohibits the federal and state government from infringing upon an individual's religious practice. Specifying a R.E.D. policy in our K-12 public school districts will ensure this core principle of our democracy is upheld.

In the last line of Article I Section 7 of the Ohio Constitution it states, “***...it shall be the duty of the general assembly to pass suitable laws to protect every religious denomination in the peaceable enjoyment of its own mode of public worship, and to encourage schools and the means of instruction.***” While I understand that some school districts already grant excused absences for religious accommodation, SB 49 will ensure universal religious accommodation for all students in K-12 public schools.

Ultimately, Senate Bill 49 will ensure every student gets the opportunity to practice their religion and express their faith without penalty. Thank you again for allowing me to give sponsor testimony on Senate Bill 49. I would be happy to answer any questions the committee may have.