

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 445. My name is Elaine Uhl and I am from Montgomery County.

When a mom friend told me about released time for religious instruction in Fall 2022, I was excited! I loved that students could have an **additional educational opportunity** during the school day. As a mom to four school-aged kids, I appreciated that released time would not interfere with academics but, rather, could positively impact classroom behaviors.

I enthusiastically joined a steering committee to bring LifeWise Academy to my neighborhood school. I also began interacting with my local Board of Education members. We had our initial in-person conversation with the Superintendent and two BOE members in June 2023 to share how community partners can fill a gap that the school district cannot legally meet. Over the following months, we spread the word with our community. **Over 470 people signed** to express interest in allowing released time to be an **option** for our school district. We sent information to each Board member and offered tours of a neighboring district's program. We spoke during the public comment time at BOE meetings. Unfortunately, after months of interaction, Northmont City Schools declined to adopt a released time due to concerns about diversity.

This was an inaccurate dismissal of released time programs since it is available to all faiths! The current statute already addresses this issue. Moreover, released time honors the separation of church and state by using no state resources. And the sponsoring entity maintains liability. Sadly, the current statute allows schools to deny students access to released time. HB 445 would give parents the ultimate choice.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to **advocate for** House Bill 445.

Sincerely,
Elaine N. Uhl