

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 Vincent Coleman and I am from Franklin County.

I work for LifeWise, I am a former principal in Columbus City schools, and a grandparent of students in elementary schools. I value religious education for my grandchildren, as do their parents, and we would love to have the option for our children to participate in a weekly offering of a Released time class that aligns with our beliefs. Unfortunately, my oldest grandson and our family were denied this right as a student in Reynoldsburg City Schools. Reynoldsburg does not have a policy according to the "May" standard outlined in the current legislation and refused to adopt a policy at the request of over 500 community members that were interested in hosting a LifeWise program. Reynoldsburg was one community that was denied the right to adopt a policy based on the opinion of a few members of the Board at the expense of parents that requested a policy be adopted.

I have been at the forefront of assisting several communities to start Released Time Religious Instruction programs. Perhaps the most personal and intentional assault on the rights of parents was what happened to parent efforts in Gahanna Public Schools. I worked alongside families in Gahanna Public Schools. The policy that had been adopted in January 2015, revised in November 2018, but was suddenly rescinded in part, due to the request of a group of parents and local churches to meet with Superintendent Deagle to utilize the existing policy to host LifeWise classes for students. The Gahanna School Board rescinded their RTRI policy on October 20, 2022 during the scheduled meeting (Public Record). It was discovered only a few hours before the October 20th meeting that the policy was on the agenda to be rescinded, but 13 individuals (along with several others in the audience) spoke at the Board meeting requesting that the policy not be rescinded. The board voted unanimously (5-0) denying parents even time for formal discussion on the matter. Again, the suddenness of the Board's actions felt personal and were a direct assault on the rights of parents.

Throughout my experiences, I've witnessed the overwhelmingly positive impact of Released Time programs across rural, suburban, and urban communities. These programs foster community support for students, families, and schools. Our LifeWise program, in particular, has consistently provided vital social and emotional support to vulnerable students. By collaborating with schools, we've been able to address critical issues such as suicide prevention, chronic absenteeism, and student behavior with evidence of positive impact. It is therefore extremely disheartening that parents are not afforded the option to choose Released Time Religious Instruction for their children, especially considering the proven benefits and the sincere desire of many families to access this educational opportunity.

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

Sincerely,

Vincent M. Coleman