

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 Lisa Vittorio and I am the Co-Director and Co-Founder of The Brightside Project in Columbiana County.

The Brightside Project is a 501c3 non-profit organization that is faith-based reaching children 3-18 years old in Columbiana and rural Mahoning County. Our mission is to equip and empower children to reach their full potential by building resiliency and giving hope. We primarily target children who have experienced trauma or have been exposed to adverse childhood experiences and take a comprehensive approach to supporting their wellbeing. We work with children and families across the community on a regular basis and when the opportunity to get involved with a religious released time program such as LifeWise Academy presented itself, we jumped at the chance to be involved because we work daily with a very hurt, lost and confused generation of children who desperately need support with moral and character development.

We created a committee of local church and community leaders, we rallied the community, we gave parents hope, we raised the launch money (AND WELL BEYOND) to start a pilot program in our local elementary school for 5th grade students. We had the location, the plan, the volunteers, the curriculum, and the transportation. All we needed was for the school district administration to acknowledge the program and let us proceed. When we met with the superintendent, we received extreme pushback. We were informed that it would be impossible to accommodate a released time program with the need for all school day minutes to be for academic, in-class instruction. He would not come into agreement with us that a released time program like LifeWise Academy would be possible to accommodate, regardless of parental wishes.

Decades of research have shown the positive impact of religious instruction on student behavior, academics and mental health. We strongly believe that giving students the opportunity to participate in a religious released time program could support their academic success, help them in their relationships and even change the course of their life. Parents want what is best for their children and we believe that presenting parents with a released time option and then giving them the ultimate choice is the right thing to do. They should get to decide whether to include religious education in their student's schedule. Our personal experience through this process proved that a couple administrators with a lack of knowledge

on released time and the law, a slight ignorance to the need for moral and character development, and with making no further effort to learn more, made an abrupt decision to exclude this option for their students when the community and parents were desperately wanting it. We acknowledge how valuable House Bill 445 will be on a local level for those of us working diligently to equip and empower children to reach their full potential. Religious released time instruction can be a game changer for our children but with pushback from the school administration, we need to give the option for such programming to the parents and allow them to decide what is best for their child.

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



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