

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 Sarah Becker and I am from Franklin County.

I have worked with a released time religious instruction program (LifeWise Academy) for the past 2 years. During that time, I've had the opportunity to meet many wonderful families in our community. When I think about why RTRI policies are so important, one family stands out in particular. For privacy purposes, I'll call them the Smiths.

The Smiths live in one of the more impoverished areas of Columbus and have a son who attends the local high school. Unfortunately, this school has a reputation for violence and other poor behavior, and Ms. Smith could see that it was impacting her son. She really desired to remove him from this environment and send him to a Christian school instead. She hoped that being in a school that taught values in line with her family's beliefs would help him to grow into the young man she knew he could be, instead of continuing to fall into the bad habits of his current peers. She researched religious schools in the area, but it immediately became apparent that cost was going to be a huge issue. She knew that there must be assistance available to low-income families like hers, but didn't know how to find it. Her search for this assistance was made even more difficult when her mother's health began to fail and she began spending her limited free time in a hospital room.

As summer drew to an end, Ms. Smith realized there was no way she would be able to get her son enrolled in a new school and coordinate financial aid in time. In August of that year, her son headed back to the neighborhood school. This was disappointing for them both, but one thing brought them comfort. They knew he would be participating in LifeWise Academy. For at least one hour per week, her son could receive the Christian education that she so desperately wanted for him.

Throughout that school year, we had the privilege of watching her son grow into a more mature, well-rounded teen. Ms. Smith was so grateful that her son could still receive religious education, even while attending a public school, and expressed this often.

The experience of the Smith family highlights why RTRI is so essential. Yes, religious schools exist, but for a variety of reasons they are not always accessible to the families that want them. RTRI allows parents like Ms. Smith to decide what's best for their family, regardless of what school their child attends. RTRI gives parents a choice, and it's a choice that should be theirs - not a school board's.

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

Respectfully,

Sarah Becker