

My name is Karen Izzi Gallagher. Thank you for taking a moment to read my opposition to HB 445, the Religious Release Time bill currently in the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee.

As a retired adjunct professor in the counseling field, and a retired K-12 educator and school counselor, I have seen the diversity of students in the classroom setting. By changing one word in current law from “may” to “shall,” the Ohio State legislature is taking decision-making control from local school boards and requiring them to excuse students from school during educational time to attend religious education. Local school boards know the makeup of their communities best.

I am a firm believer that parents and guardians need to make time for their families to receive religious education if they so choose. If they would like their children to receive religious education during the school day, they can do as our family did and enroll their children in a parochial school. They will have the benefit of the school voucher program to pay tuition.

Releasing students at any level, particularly the elementary level, from classes such as art, music, physical education, computers, health, and other types of subjects takes them away from classes that may be the only time the student is exposed to such options and opportunities. Classes that they thrive in. Classes that as a high school student, may help them choose a path into computer technology, music education, artist or maestro, or research and development.

What happens when a large percentage of students are excused for planned religious education classes, leaving only a handful of students in a classroom, art room, music room, physical education class, and so on? Do those classes become study halls? Do those teachers become obsolete? Reduction in force (RIF)?

Let me address safety. School districts have spent thousands of dollars reinforcing their campuses and schools from active shooters. Buzzer systems on locked exterior doors to enter. Metal detectors to scan for weapons, knives, cell phones. Resource officers walking the hallways, patrolling the grounds and parking lots. One-way coverings on the exterior windows. Identification badges for staff and students along with visitor badges for anyone signing into the building. Playgrounds fenced in to keep students corralled during recess. BCI/FBI fingerprinting for all volunteers and employees of the districts. This is a real concern for districts where students will leave school buildings or campus

environment and walk to an unsecure location such as a church or another location to attend religious classes. Who is responsible if someone is hurt?

Finally, changing one word from “may” to “shall,” will open a can of worms. Will all religions or nontraditional religions be permitted to have the same opportunity to have their young people released for religious education? Or will some be banned? Jewish youth for Bat Mitzvah or Bar Mitzvah lessons? Catholic youth for Catholic Christian Doctrine, First Communion and Confirmation classes? Muslim youth for Islamic studies? Jehovah’s Witnesses? The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints? There is more than just one religion in our country, in our state, in our communities.

In closing, I ask that no changes be made to current law and that HB 445 not be voted out of committee. Local school boards know the makeup of their communities far better than the state legislature. Let them create their own Release Time for Religious Instruction (RTRI) policy without further involvement of the Ohio General Assembly.

Respectfully submitted,
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