



**Opponent Testimony for House Bill 445
House Primary and Secondary Education Committee**

Dr. Christina Collins, Executive Director, Honesty for Ohio Education

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee:

Thank you for providing me the opportunity to testify today. My name is Dr. Christina Collins. I am the Executive Director of [Honesty for Ohio Education](https://www.honestyforohioeducation.org). I'm also a proud parent of three children who attend Ohio public schools.

Honesty is a nonpartisan, statewide [coalition of 70+ organizations](#), and thousands of parents, teachers, students, and community members across Ohio that centers the [whole child framework](#) in our work. Today I am representing this coalition in opposition to House Bill 445.

House Bill 445 has been one of our concerns since January when we launched our local organizing effort, called Honesty Teams, which is a network of parents and community members throughout Ohio who want to be more involved in their public schools. Through this network, we have heard hundreds of concerns about religious release time programs from across the state.

When House Bill 445 was introduced, our coalition initially approached it as an interested party because we believe in religious pluralism, have partner organizations spanning a variety of religious beliefs, and support the observance of all religious practices. However, during proponent testimony in June, it became clear this bill is not about religious pluralism, it is about one, very well-funded program wanting to push its brand of Christian nationalist beliefs on a captive audience during the school day. Although smaller RTRI programs do exist in Ohio, the vast majority of them do not have multi-million dollar budgets or goals to become statewide and national programs. With this realization, and hearing so much concern at the local level, Honesty became an opponent of this bill.

Throughout this year, school boards across Ohio worked in partnership with their parents and community members to determine if religious release time was right for their communities. Specific concerns surrounding these programs have been illuminated throughout this process, including flawed background checks, problematic liability policies, hidden curriculum, beliefs that perpetuate hate against non-Christians, and questionable practices of incentivizing students to recruit other students to attend.

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We have heard hundreds of stories about how implementing these programs has impacted schools, such as:

- Disrupting the education of children during a time when the focus should be learning. Much like the Governor's commentary this year on the distraction caused by cell phone usage in schools and learning losses that accumulate from time spent refocusing, these programs distract both students leaving and returning to campus and those who remain in school while others come and go;
- Creating hostile environments as students have told other students they are going to hell for non-Christian beliefs and for their family composition (LGBTQ+ families, unmarried parents);
- Taxing already busy school administrators who have been asked to handle behavioral issues that inadequately trained program instructors experience when students are with them; and
- Disrupting school operations as teachers have been asked to escort students to and from transport buses.

Further complicating this issue, the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce has issued decisions around RTRI that have created more problems and confusion for districts. When Honesty reached out for model policies or guidance in May, we were informed RTRI was entirely a local decision. However, since then, the Department has weighed in by choosing to provide meal reimbursements during RTRI time despite USDA guidance, and they have made direct connections between these programs and schools' core educational programming. In an email, the Department stated: "Based on Ohio's statutory structure for released time courses, released time courses can reasonably be considered school related functions", a statement that puts school boards in the precarious position of seemingly sponsoring certain religions.

These are serious and significant issues for communities to have to consider, and they have provided enough reason for many districts to either choose not to adopt a policy or to rescind the policy they had previously adopted. These decisions have been thoughtfully made at the local level by those closest to the issue and should not be undone by government overreach. This bill forces these communities to do something they have already determined they do not want to do. It undermines the school, parent, and community partnership, and enables programs to access children during a time they should be focused on academics, not being pulled in and out of school.

We urge you to vote no on House Bill 445 and to entrust Ohio's communities to make decisions that are right for their school districts.

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