

Opponent Testimony for HB 445
Primary and Secondary Education Committee
November 12, 2024

Donald Morris, parent

Chair Gayle Manning, Vice Chair Sarah Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Phillip M. Robinson, Jr., and members of the Primary and Secondary Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify. My name is Donald Morris (he/him). I am a longtime Ohio resident and father of a child in a public school. I am writing to express my opposition to [HB 445](#), which seeks to alter the well-established system of Released Time Religious Instruction (RTRI) by changing the permissive “may” to “shall” in Section [3313.6022](#) of the Ohio Revised Code. I believe this unnecessary bill threatens the autonomy of local school boards and undermines constitutional principles. I urge you to oppose this legislation for several key reasons:

I feel that this change would open the door for religious programs to enter into the public schools and create a burden both on school resources and staff to accommodate them, as well as possibly presenting a “slippery slope” of our public schools endorsing one religion over another, which is a First Amendment violation.

Our teachers are already struggling to teach children what they need to succeed in school; taking away what is presented on paper as an hour a week but in practice is most likely more robs teachers and children of valuable and finite time in the school day and causes disruptions in this educational time, both in terms of actual time and a diminished learning experience for those children not participating in a program. Children wishing to take part in religious practice can do so with ease outside of the school day, and focus on learning “the three R’s” while they’re at school.

My neighborhood and the immediate area contains a number of places of worship in a wide diversity of religious denominations. There is a place for religion and religious education in our society, but it isn’t in the public school system; rather, it is in the churches and religious schools that exist.

Also, school boards are chosen by members of the community to uphold the community’s interests as it applies to the education of their children. With that, they’re entrusted with making decisions that reflect the local values and makeup of the community. What plays well in Van Wert might not play as well in Westerville, and mandating that schools adopt RTRI would not allow local school boards to decide in the best interest of the children they serve.

When Section 3313.6022 was codified into law in 2014, the 130th General Assembly wisely chose the language “may” instead of “shall” to give local school boards discretion in permitting RTRI. The permissive language was designed to respect the diverse needs and views of individual communities. This flexible approach allows locally elected school boards to decide what is in the best interest of their students and administration while not mandating schools to accommodate a forced implementation of religious instruction. The current language of the law also reflects the judiciary’s preference for protecting local governance from unnecessary state interference.

Please consider my testimony and oppose HB 445. Please leave important decisions about when to adopt policy to the local school boards. Thank you.