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Greetings Committee Chairperson Gale Manning,

My name is Jennifer Skerness and I am the parent of a Senior attending Westerville South High School and the aunt of a first grader at Cherrington Elementary in the Westerville public school district.

I would like to officially go on record as opposing HB 445 regarding the RTRI policy. I attended all of the Westerville Public school Board meetings regarding rescinding RTRI, as well as listened to the recordings of these meetings multiple times because I honestly couldn't believe some of the things I was hearing.

At first, those in favor of Life Wise and RTRI in public schools were pretty tame, but at each meeting they grew progressively more aggressive and by the last 2 meetings, they let it loose and said the quiet parts out loud.

They validated every concern I had with the program when I first heard about it. One of the speakers from Life Wise said verbatim "Everyone should be Christian". Speakers in support of Life Wise openly discriminated against a Muslim school board member. Another of the Lifewise supporters was a proud Christian Nationalist and you don't have to take my word for it, these meetings are available on youtube. The most disturbing thing to me, is the way that the Life Wise program skewed this whole ordeal stating that those in opposition are trying to do away with Life Wise, are anti-Christian, etc. when the truth is that those in opposition simply opposed the program operating during school hours. They could do before or after school but it was clear that wouldn't work for them because it wouldn't give them the same opportunities to reach the "unchurched". They count on the children who participate in the program to be visibly doing something "special" during the regular school day to peak other children's curiosity and take advantage of FOMO to recruit other children.

I would also like to state that of those who came to the school board meetings and spoke in opposition, many of them were pastors, one a PhD in theology, many of them deeply Christian and they all called out the dangers of having programs like Life Wise operating within public schools and offered great alternatives but Life Wise would not stray from their position. Their leader, Joel, bullied and made veiled, and some not so veiled threats of legal action against our schoolboard members. One of the Life Wise proponents told the board that if they rescinded RTRI, to "get ready" because "they would be waging spiritual warfare the likes of which they could not comprehend".

Religious instruction, especially when skewed towards one religion has ZERO place in a standard public school day. It is also deeply concerning that programs such as Life Wise operate with little scrutiny as to who can be involved in the program & do not need to publish any of their curriculum for public review. I

fear if more programs are allowed to operate under this model, the already alarming distractions, & logistical issues of busing kids to and from schools will only become greater more difficult to manage.

If HB 445 passes, the release time programs will add a significant burden on teachers and school administration and be a disruption to childrens' learning. It is also completely unnecessary to require release time options during the school day when it can easily be provided after school, before school, or on weekends.

I beg of you, please take these concerns into consideration and vote down HB 445. Religious programs during school time have proved to be divisive, disruptive and distract from the ultimate goal of enriching our children. My district followed the desires of its students' parents and made an informed decision to rescind its Release Time for Religious Instruction, primarily due to logistical concerns. It's time to put an end to unnecessary distractions.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Skernes

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