

Hello,

As a lifelong Ohioan and home-owner, I ask you to please vote No on HB 445.

First, HB 445 seems to be allowing a private entity to influence state legislation and public school governance. School Ministries Ohio has been "training Ohio Leaders to offer Released Time Bible Education" for almost 20 years and credits themselves with helping to pass and writing the current RTRI law, but they have not been involved in this new push to change RTRI. Their silence on this proposed legislation strongly reiterates the idea that this is being pushed by and solely for LifeWise Academy specifically.

Furthermore, these outside groups are not qualified, are not sticking to the requirements of RTRI (i.e. are acting unconstitutionally), are not providing ADA accommodations and are causing disruptions in the classroom, due to things like frequently returning children to school later than they are supposed to, so even more classroom time is being lost.

I truly worry about student safety. They teach obedience and submissiveness, for instance, without caveats around personal safety and consent. These volunteers and paid employees aren't required to complete training around barriers to abuse or held to "2-deep leadership". Their background checking is not adequate. There have been reports of "teachers" resorting to physical contact to deal with behavior issues, again, because they aren't trained or experienced educators.

In addition to this, I worry about the "othering" of students. To quote Samantha F. Lawrence Anne Nicol, Gaylor Legal Fellow and Freedom From Religion Foundation:

"Released time programs can lead to negative consequences for students who do not participate. Released time programs often create uncomfortable distinctions between students as it is obvious which students leave school to attend the program and which stay behind. In communities where a significant portion or majority of students participate in released time bible classes, the students who do not join are inevitably singled out in the eyes of their peers.

Released time programs often encourage students to proselytize their peers in an attempt to persuade non-attending students to join the program, leading to bullying. Moreover, non-attending students are often not provided with adequate substantive lessons while their peers attend the released time class. FFRF has received several complaints from families in different school districts alleging that non-attending students were given busy work, or no work at all, as a consequence of staying behind during released time classes. Additionally, we have received at least one complaint reporting that a school assigned non-attending students additional homework seemingly as punishment for refusing to participate in a released time program."

As Ohioans and Americans, everyone has a right to practice their preferred faith. It isn't necessary to have students leave the public classroom to practice or learn about their religion.

The assertion is preposterous and not based on people's realities. Ohio Elementary Education is 910 hours. That leaves 7,850 hours outside of school time for students and families to practice and learn about their faith. Public school students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their schools. Thus, public schools may not in any way promote or otherwise show favoritism toward religion, nor may they coerce students to believe or participate in any religion or religious exercise. It is a basic principle that the First Amendment requires governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.

Thank you,
Sonya Reed
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