

Witness Testimony  
House Bill 445  
11/8/24

I write in reference to House Bill 445, sponsored by Reps Click and Cutrona, currently assigned to the Primary and Secondary Education Committee of the Ohio House of Representatives. As an Ohio taxpayer, Amherst EVSD resident, and Vermilion Local School District administrator, I oppose this intrusive, unneeded legislation that subverts the will of the people at the local community level, imposing the authority and ideology of a radical minority to the detriment of students, schools and communities.

First, the local community deserves to make decisions like this one about its schools, not politicians in Columbus. The story of Vermilion Local School District and its interaction with LifeWise Academy, the sole reason for this bill's existence in Ohio, is instructive. A group of local church leaders learned about LifeWise Academy and started a chapter. Eventually, its representatives approached district administrators, who considered their proposal. Our board members listened to community feedback, learned about the program and its potential impact on our schools and children, and eventually declined to change our policy to permit LifeWise to remove kids from our schools. A stated reason for the school board's stance was the disruption that the program would bring to our students, teachers and schools. Since that decision, I have watched this disruption play out in other districts that have approved RTRI policies.

Along the way to the Vermilion board's decision, vigorous debate at public meetings and even at our local pastoral association characterized exactly the kind of democratic debate and conversation in which communities like ours should engage. In a word, our representative democracy worked. I know that Pastor Click likes the way democracy worked in Fremont, too, where the school board approved the program. What I can't figure out is why he thinks it is justified to overrule Vermilion's community decision.

Second, any notion that LifeWise Academy is anything but a political movement masquerading as a religious education movement is dispelled by examining the group itself, and legislators need to see through this charade. Three words emblazon the top of their webpage. Are those words "Teach kids character!" or "Help kids grow!"? No, those three words are "DURING SCHOOL HOURS."

Character education or the growth of children – those aren't the point. Diminishing the worth and value of our public schools, and removing reasonable impediments to a religious group shoving

a particular brand of indoctrination down kids' throats – that's the point. Declining church attendance is the point.

LifeWise's founder, Joel Penton, has received fawning attention and support from groups like The Heritage Foundation and The Family Research Council, whose book *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* lays out exactly how Christian Nationalists will subvert public education and funnel students and money to private organizations like churches in the coming years. Connecting the dots isn't that hard.

But I don't need to scan the landscape of national politics to uncover conspiracies and guess at dark motives. I just need to remember our experience in Vermilion. In the second of two meetings with a local clergyman, the Superintendent and I, in an effort to bring together our schools and our churches to serve kids, suggested the idea of an after-school program in which local churches could meet the needs of students. We even suggested ways the school could help. This idea didn't last long – it was never spoken of publicly again, being quickly quashed by those connected to the national LifeWise organization because it wasn't "DURING SCHOOL HOURS."

Which brings me to my final point. I am the son of a retired elementary school principal, one who wouldn't have been in favor of 'release time for religious instruction' because of its negative impacts for the kids and school (I've asked him.) But he was also the youth minister at our church when I was growing up, and cared deeply about what he saw as Christian values – not just for my siblings and I, but for those hundreds of other youth he impacted. To say I was in church a lot would be an understatement. Between Sunday services, Sunday School, youth meetings, Wednesday night prayer meetings, and Friday night youth groups, it amounted to 14+ hours per week. And that didn't count revivals and camp meetings multiple times per year. My family chose to spend that time because of its values.

There are 138 hours per week when kids aren't in school. If so many people are deciding the church experience or religious instruction aren't important enough for them to spend some of that time in church, why are politicians so bent on overruling a local community that decides the 35 hours of school per week should be important enough to not be interrupted?

Please help give House Bill 445 the death in committee that it deserves.