

Dear Esteemed Education Committee Members of the Ohio House of Representatives,

I am writing to express deep concern regarding modifying the current Ohio Release Time for Religious Instruction (RTRI) policy. While acknowledging the importance of religious freedom, it's crucial to uphold the principle of separation of church and state, a cornerstone of our democracy.

In 2014, when Section 3313.6022 was enacted, the 130th General Assembly intentionally used the term “may” rather than “shall,” allowing local school boards the option to approve or reject Released Time Religious Instruction (RTRI). This wording respects the varied needs and perspectives of each community, offering a flexible framework. This approach empowers locally elected school boards to make decisions that best serve their students and staff without imposing a compulsory religious instruction program. Additionally, the current language aligns with judicial principles that favor safeguarding local control from excessive state involvement.

It is troubling that the main driver behind HB 445 appears to be solely to serve the interests of LifeWise Academy, a private religious organization. Allowing a private group to shape state legislation and influence public school governance establishes a risky precedent. This raises serious concerns about the undue sway of corporate interests over public education policy. LifeWise Academy and its leaders have been transparent about their direct efforts to pressure legislators into changing state laws—not only in Ohio but across the country. They have already successfully influenced lawmakers in Indiana and Oklahoma to replace “may” with “shall” in similar legislation.

There are many significant problems with the LifeWise Corporation. Although the direct teachings of Lifewise are in direct opposition of ensuring a secular school experience, Lifewise, per their materials, is encouraging students to bring their friends to off-site religious instruction sessions and using rewards such as candy to incentivize participation. While it is acknowledged that parental permission is required for students to participate, the methods employed to attract and retain participants raise significant ethical questions and are highly problematic. Encouraging students to bring their friends to religious instruction sessions, coupled with the promise of rewards like candy, crosses a line of ethical conduct in the educational setting. This approach manipulates young children into participating in religious activities that may conflict with their own beliefs or their families' beliefs. It creates a coercive environment where peer pressure and material incentives are used to influence religious choices, which is both inappropriate and morally objectionable

Lastly, educators have so many responsibilities, and adding the coordination and management of students being off-site, make-up work, ensuring instruction doesn't

occur when they are off-site, etc., is an added burden to teachers who are already under tremendous demand.

Thank you for your careful consideration of this testimony.

Michelle and Thomas DePolo