

Opponent Testimony for H.B. 445
Primary and Secondary Education Committee
November 11, 2024

Caitlyn Hoffman, Teacher

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 Caitlyn Hoffman. I am a teacher in the Sylvania City Schools District, in Sylvania. 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.

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.

Additionally, it is concerning that the primary motivation for HB 445 seems to be for nothing more than accommodating the interests of [LifeWise Academy](#), a private religious organization. Allowing a private entity to influence state legislation and public school governance sets a dangerous precedent. It raises significant concerns about the undue influence of corporate interests on public education policy. LifeWise Academy and its leadership have been transparent about directly pressuring legislators to change state law, not only in Ohio, but every state in the nation. They have already successfully persuaded lawmakers to adopt a “may to shall” language change in [Indiana](#) and Oklahoma.

School Ministries Ohio has been “training Ohio leaders to offer Released Time Bible Education” for almost 20 years, “and in 2014 [...] took the lead to educate Ohio’s legislature” and credits themselves with helping not only pass, but in fact writing the current RTRI law. However they did not submit proponent testimony or publicly speak out in support of HB 445. Their silence on this proposed legislation is another factor that strongly reiterates the idea that this is being pushed by and solely for LifeWise Academy specifically.

Another key reason to consider would be the U.S. Supreme Court's rulings in [Zorach v. Clauson](#) and [McCullum v. Board of Education](#). These rulings highlight the dangers of religious entanglement in public education and underscore the importance of schools maintaining neutrality toward religion. The entanglement between public education and religious instruction is dangerous. It also undermines the secular purpose of public schooling. The courts have repeatedly affirmed that public schools must remain neutral on religious matters, ensuring that students are free from coercion or implied endorsement of any religious beliefs.

Moreover, McCollum in particular emphasized that state-sponsored religious programs that occur within public school systems can create an appearance of endorsement, which is unconstitutional. Forcing schools to accommodate RTRI in a mandatory way risks crossing this line, creating legal vulnerabilities for districts statewide.

In summary, HB 445 is an unnecessary and potentially harmful piece of legislation. It threatens local control, violates constitutional principles, and risks undermining the quality of education in Ohio's public schools. I urge you to protect the integrity of our education system and oppose HB 445.

Please consider my testimony and oppose H.B. 445.