

November 9, 2024

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson and members of the Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to submit written testimony.

My name is Ana Chapman. I am writing to express my opposition to HB 445, which seeks to alter the well-established system of Released Time for Religious Instruction (RTRI) by changing the permissive “may” to “shall” in Section 3313.6022 of the Ohio Revised Code.

I have served public schools in several different roles, for over 30 years. I’ve spent the last 32 years in the classroom as a public elementary music educator. I’ve had the privilege of being elected 3 times to my local Board of Education and currently am in my 11th year of service. As a mother of three graduates, I spent 20 years as a volunteer with the PTA at the local, district and state level, the athletic and band boosters, the education foundation, and as the chair of several levy and bond issue campaigns. I know public schools. I feel that my involvement gives me unique perspectives on the current debate about religious instruction during the school day.

Students and teachers already experience significant stress and pressure daily because of the focus on achieving higher scores on state tests and district report cards. Public schools serve students of varied backgrounds and religions, and school staff work hard to create environments where they can ALL feel safe, heard and respected. Offering religious instruction during the school day, regardless of it taking place off property, is a disruption to the education and safety of our students. School staff always strives to avoid disruptions to the well planned schedule of the school day. Taking students out of school causes disruption not only for those leaving but also for those staying.

By law, this is currently permissible in Ohio and has been left up to local school boards. My school district adopted this policy back in 2015, and we have several students who have been taking advantage of it. But recently, a **for-profit organization** has started operating in many districts. They take multiple children out at a time, sometimes several times a week. I don’t believe this was the original intent of the law. In many districts, this is happening during art, music, physical education, library, technology and

elective stem classes. Those subjects are essential to the overall education and wellbeing of every child. Some students who may struggle in school, might only find success when they are in those classes.

It is ultimately a parent's choice to allow their child to participate, but what does it say to the children, to other staff and to the taxpayers? That those subjects are less important and children can just miss them? Even if students are required to make up the work, how does a music teacher go about putting on expected performances when students are missing the class on a regular basis? This directly affects ALL the students, whether they are leaving for religious instruction or not. These classes have state-approved learning standards, just as math, language arts, science and social studies do. They are equally important.

What about students with disabilities? Students with IEPs and 504s? What about students who require a one on one educational aide? Students who require toileting? Students who require interpreters? Behavior issues that may occur? Public school educators are trained to address the needs of ALL students to ensure that every student's requirements are met. There are laws preventing schools from disclosing confidential student information. How will the adults in charge of these students know how to best address their learning needs? Will they be contacting the child's school teacher or principal when behavior issues occur? Teachers of the subjects that students are being pulled from are licensed educators. Salaries of those teachers are being paid through taxpayer money. All of this would be in conflict with the law which states "no public funds are expended and no public personnel are involved in providing the religious instruction."

I also have serious safety concerns, as a parent, a teacher and a school board member. In addition to renewing teaching licenses every 5 years, all school employees must be fingerprinted for FBI and Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation background checks every 5 years and, are required to do annual training on Bloodborne Pathogens, Slips trips and falls prevention, homeless education, depression and suicide prevention, prevention of mental, emotional and behavioral disorders in students, email safety, child abuse and neglect mandated reporting, and fire safety and fire-extinguisher use. School bus drivers are required to have a CDL. Can the same be said of employees of any organization looking to take children out of school for religious instruction during the school day?

By permitting organizations to remove students during the school day, the state undermines the numerous expectations it imposes on public schools. Decisions about adopting a release for religious instruction policy, or any for that matter, needs to be left to the governing authority of the locally elected school boards. They know what is best for their students and their communities. Local school boards need to have a say on whether they want to adopt a policy AND on how the policy is used. This includes not allowing outside, for-profit organizations from taking students out of school and disrupting the learning environment.

I urge you to oppose this legislation.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ana Chapman". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of "Ana" and "Chapman" being capitalized and prominent.

Ana Chapman