

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

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 Molly Gaines (she/her). I am the mother of a public school child and the co-founder of [Parents Against Lifewise](#). 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, undermines constitutional principles, and creates a disparity between school children and families. I also believe that this change is a direct result of the lobbying done by one specific RTRI program, and their powerful supporter; that are preying on our public schools.

In 2020; I had a two year old little girl, was in an abusive relationship, living in Darke County and noticing red “Lifewise Academy” signs popping up progressively all around me. Then, I began seeing donation requests on our local community social media pages regularly. I personally found this very upsetting as there were so many families living around me under the national poverty level. Our community needed that money! This is when I started to pay more attention but I didn’t have the mental or emotional capacity at that time to fully understand what it was I was seeing. Once I moved to Montgomery County and my life began to settle again, I grew concerned seeing the signs appearing here as well and began to research this parachurch organization.

What I found was a “program” that seeks to indoctrinate children and use them to evangelize to each other, to create disparity in public schools, use taxpayer funded school resources, and undermine the inclusivity and respect that our public schools are trying to instill into our youngest generation. By their own admission they seek to “reach every unchurched public school child” and are doing so by taking advantage of our RTRI policies that have historically been used for minority faith students and their specific circumstances. By their own, local places of worship, not an outside multi-million dollar corporation.

They routinely throw “parties” that feature food (sweets, popcorn, Raising Cains as examples) to entice children to want to join their friends in leaving school for an hour a week. Not only is this predatory as leaving for RTRI shouldn’t be seen as a treat that some children get and others don’t, it also preys on food insecurity in kids. Lifewise Academy claims to be non-denominational but their curriculum is developed by the Southern Baptist Convention. They claim to perform background checks on their employees and volunteers but they are using a private company and the reporting is comparable to a credit report. In most schools the children who are leaving to attend this program are missing valuable class time in subjects like Art,

Music, P.E., Tech, and Library. Furthermore they are interrupting the education of the children whose parents did not opt them into Lifewise.

In some instances; those children are being given busy work, or movies to watch or they are put into study halls in elementary school. Those children are then returning back to class and interrupting the other children who are still learning. They return from Lifewise and bullying the other kids, singling them out for not attending, teaching them about what they've learned despite their parents wishes, telling them that they and their families will burn in hell. There are reports of children fighting, whining, and begging to go to Lifewise Academy despite the fact that their family might be Jewish or Catholic etc.

There are almost 7000 parents and concerned community members that have joined our movement in opposition of Lifewise Academy and other similar RTRI programs. I am not alone in my opposition and we are growing by the day as more people become aware. HB445 is designed to remove any chance a school board has of defending its student population from this threat. It isn't about parental choice, as they will claim. It's about evangelism and power. It's about interrupting the public school day and using a legally required captive audience. I urge you to oppose this legislation to protect the separation of church and state and our kids from being discriminated against and ostracized for their families religious beliefs or lack thereof.

Sincerely,

Molly Gaines