

Opponent Testimony for House Bill 445

Ohio House Primary and Secondary Education Committee

Tuesday, November 12, 2024

Nicole Bryant, MEd

Ohio Educator (2006-current)

Ohio public school parent

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 submit testimony today. My name is Nicole Bryant (she/her/hers).

I am a resident of Swanton on the border of Lucas and Fulton County. I am an Ohio public school graduate (2001), a parent to three current public-school students (2nd, 5th and 10th) and a public-school educator in Ohio. This is my 18th year teaching. I have served thousands of our Ohio public school students, I have trained new teachers from multiple states, and I have also taught remedial courses at a local community college. I am also the secretary of our school PTO.

I am writing today to share my opposition of HB 445.

I am strongly opposed to the RTRI in its current form. While the intent behind the bill may be to provide students with additional opportunities, its effects, as implemented, are negatively impacting the school experience for many students, particularly those who are not participating. It is also negatively impacting school staff members at a time when the school staff shortage is alarming.

For non-participating students, the bill creates a sense of exclusion, leaving them feeling distracted and disappointed during school hours. Students are feeling pressure from their friends to attend if their family has chosen not to participate, and they are disappointed that the quality of activities during release time is minimized due to peer absence. Teachers work hard to promote a sense of community and collaboration in the classroom. Things such as Social Contracts, classroom roles and PBIS initiatives are focused on positive team building and are hindered by further division from RTRI within the mere six hours of a school day. The release time during the school day absolutely impacts the environment and students are further divided based on their participation or lack thereof. Mental health diagnoses are on the rise for youth. We need to get back to the basics of focusing on quality education and student wellbeing in our public schools- NOT introducing more complexities and stressors for students and the RTRI has demonstrated to be very complex and stressful for staff, parents and students alike.

The pressure placed on staff to manage the scheduling and monitoring of students' needs due to RTRI has introduced unnecessary stress, detracting from their ability to focus on core educational priorities. There are over a thousand decisions that teachers make in each school day. Teachers are

expressing overwhelm, are reaching burn out and teacher retention is a major concern from anyone involved in schools. My own children have expressed concern about their wonderful teachers “having a bad day.” Teachers are using more and more time off for “mental health reasons.” Substitutes are being hired with lower and lower credentials due to the shortage. It is a crisis that cannot be ignored. We may not have all the answers yet, but we can oppose HB 445 and remove this one stressor from their plate. Teachers in our public schools do not have the extra capacity to worry about which students are coming or going, which students need their medication while away, or that a student is having a tough day and may need a little extra support while transitioning back and forth. Many students in lower grades are still in self-contained classrooms. The transitions would be new and that will take strategic implementation to be effective and safe. Teachers spend roughly six weeks fully teaching procedures- how are we assuring our students are prepared for the additional transitions to be smooth and aligned with expectations- moreover, whose expectations are students following during RTRI transitions to and from? This confusion can and will affect students negatively. Schools work hard to provide clear and consistent expectations and the RTRI program will interrupt this initiative.

I once spent time tracking the number of interruptions within a given lesson due to desperation for an environment where learning felt prioritized. We just want to teach more and be distracted less. Instructional minutes matter to our school staff- whether these minutes are with teachers in core content, specials like art, physical education and music, or even recess in which social lessons are taking place with their peers- students have only so many minutes in school and we must protect that valuable time.

Finally, especially as a parent, I have security concerns associated with the policy as is implemented. Any adults involved with the RTRI programs will have proximity to students and school buildings and routines within the school. As a parent who will not be allowing my student to participate in these programs, I will have limited access to knowing who these staff members are that are learning the ins and outs of our schools. Who is responsible for assuring these staff are properly screened? What if new staff are hired in partway through the year? How will schools monitor the RTRI staff to assure that any adults working with our school staff and students pose minimal risk? Who is responsible for the safety of not only students participating but for the students who are back in the buildings? The more we open our school doors, the more risk we invite in. As a parent, safety is my number one priority and at this point Ohio has not addressed the risks that come with RTRI programs enough for me to believe that student safety and wellbeing is being considered. We certainly do not need to add to this risk before we take a long hard look at how we can better assure student safety.

Religious instruction, while important, is highly personal and varies from family to family. Parents already have access to before- and after-school programs that can meet these needs without disrupting the core educational experience for all students and risking secure school environments. I urge you to reconsider policies that interrupt the sanctity of education at a time when students need a focused, uninterrupted and safe environment to address their learning gaps. Teachers need our support now more than ever. Ohio can get back to being a place where teachers want to teach because they feel supported and valued- adding to their plate and reducing the importance of their instructional minutes will not send that message. Supporting our teachers will be the most effective way to positively increase student learning and wellbeing. Teachers have the greatest impact on student success- let's value their work and prioritize their time and resources.

I respectfully ask that you take these concerns into account. Education is my life's work and passion. Through this, I hope to leave my students and children a world that is inclusive and equitable, welcoming and diverse, filled with critical thinkers from all backgrounds who can thrive and who believe they matter. They do matter to me, and I hope they matter to you.

For teachers, school staff, parents, students and the many taxpayers in Ohio who overwhelmingly oppose the current and proposed RTRI influence on our schools- please demonstrate your support and vote NO for HB 445.