

Opponent Testimony for HB 445
Primary and Secondary Education Committee
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Kara Coates
President, Gahanna-Jefferson Board of Education

Chair Gayle Manning, Vice Chair Sarah Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Phillip M. Robinson Jr., and members of the Primary and Secondary Committee,

Hello. My name is Kara Coates. I am the President of the Gahanna-Jefferson School Board, a parent, a community member, and a mental health and well-being professional. Our school district, Gahanna-Jefferson, is a diverse community with a strong focus on academic excellence and student well-being. We have carefully considered the implications of House Bill 445 and believe it poses significant challenges to our district and others throughout the State. Thank you for this opportunity to share the three reasons we oppose this bill.

First, big decisions should be evidence-based. Making religious release time mandatory versus optional for school districts is a big decision. It should be evidence-based to ensure the best decision is made for all students. We have not found any evidence-based research to support the idea that religious release time during the school day improves student outcomes and well-being. The lack of evidence supporting this bill raises significant questions about its effectiveness and potential to benefit our students. Decisions of this nature should have substantial evidence.

Second, there isn't a free period to allow this time. There are many state-mandated additions in place and proposed to the curriculum, such as CPR requirements, the science of reading, fentanyl education, STD education, computer, and career education - what goes away to make the time? Some say specials like art, PE, and music, but those areas are evidence-based in improving well-being and whole-child learning. They are not specials but core curriculum. They create essential neuro pathways. Implementing mandatory religious release time could disrupt these crucial aspects of our curriculum, affecting our students' well-being and academic success. Some might say to use the lunch period, but that is a time students develop relationships with all their peers, which is also central to whole-child learning. Students attending religious release programs could miss out on this vital social time, therefore missing opportunities to play and grow with their peers.

The third is safety, both physical and emotional. If mandatory, more and more religious organizations will want to have release time. Once approved for one, we would need to say yes to all interested. Numerous releases for religious instruction will cause many students to come and go, opening districts to safety risks. In a time when school shootings are on the rise, the constant movement of students and different organizations coming and going throughout a time period is unsafe. It will also cause significant disruption to the school day, affecting the learning environment for all students. There is also a liability risk to the district when outside organizations make mistakes - for example when there is shared custody and a disagreement about student participation. HB 445 does not outline any required safety measures. How can we be sure the religious release time program leaders do not have criminal records and will keep our

kids safe? Public schools have to require any volunteer in their buildings to pay for BCI and FBI checks. Will religious release program directors, staff, and volunteers be able to bypass the background check requirements? Will this be different from district to district? We know LifeWise, a current organization operating in some districts, has inadequate background checks as they recently hired (and later fired) an educator who was let go from her last teaching job for sexual misconduct with students.

LifeWise is known for sending kids back to school with candy and other incentives to recruit their fellow students. This is both distracting and has already led to bullying in some districts with LifeWise programs. Who ensures religious release program leaders don't give out treats containing nuts and allergens? As Ohioans and Americans, everyone has a right to practice their preferred faith. But no one has the right to push their faith onto someone else's child in a public school. Ohio law says the child's school isn't liable for injury arising during transportation to or from a release program when private transport is used. Who IS liable? How are we ensuring students are protected? Will religious release programs have epi-pens, defibrillators, Narcan, and trained staff available to help in the case of an emergency? What is the policy if a student gets sick while attending a religious release program?

We are not against religious instruction. I attended Sunday School every Sunday as a child. We are only in opposition to a mandatory religious release time during the school day due to the lack of evidence of benefit to students, lack of available time to do so while not increasing the burden on our educators, and safety risks during the school day, which do not equal what is best for student success. When LifeWise came to our district for release time, although our policy does not support time during the school day, we did offer before and after school in our buildings. They turned it down, saying there were too many competing priorities before and after school. There are competing priorities during the school day, too. If time for religious instruction is so important, why would before and after school be out of the question?

Lastly, students' First Amendment religious freedom rights are accommodated in numerous ways. For example, they can pray, form religious clubs, read religious texts, be excused from school for religious holidays and events, wear religious attire, and express their beliefs freely. These existing accommodations ensure students can practice their faith without disrupting the school day or compromising their safety.

Thank you for your time and this opportunity to voice our concerns and opposition.