

Chair Manning and the other members of the Primary and Secondary Education  
Committee,

I am writing in opposition to HR 445, which would allow religious organizations to meet in our public schools regardless of the feelings of parents or local school districts. As a sociology professor, I regularly teach on the topic of religion as it exists in our society; this content typically includes discussions on the tactics of coercive religious organizations, which are typically referred to as “cults” in our common vernacular.

Contrary to popular belief, such organizations are typically unassuming. If a cult were to take advantage of provisions under HR 445, they would likely present themselves as Christian and use the children of their members as their agents in our schools. Given these realities, it is easy to imagine a situation in which a young person could be bullied into attending such a meeting out of fear that they fall out of favor with their peer group.

K-12 students are still discovering their beliefs as well as building their critical thinking skills; this is exactly why we have laws protecting those under the age of legal adulthood. Children cannot be expected to discern if a religious meeting is in line with their personal religious beliefs or those of their family. Given their emotional and intellectual stage of development, middle school students are especially prone to coercion in this regard.

Thank you for your attention in this matter,

Jeremy E. Baker