

## Opposition Testimony to Ohio HB 445

Presented by Michael Wilson, School Board Member, Milford Exempted Village School District

To the Honorable Members of the Ohio House of Representatives,

Thank you for the opportunity to present my perspective in opposition to House Bill 445. As a board member of the Milford Exempted Village School District, I am committed to safeguarding the interests of our students, parents, and community members. Today, I speak out against HB 445 due to its potential to disrupt our public schools' essential focus on inclusivity, secular education, and safety. This legislation would open the door to increased ideological influence in our schools, which I believe risks blurring the necessary boundaries between church and state.

First, I want to address a troubling precedent this legislation could establish. I am in strong opposition to the activities of the LifeWise group, which has sought an unprecedented level of access to our Ohio schools, aiming to provide religious instruction during school hours. LifeWise has circumvented critical safety and transparency practices, raising serious concerns among parents and educators alike. In our district, even volunteers must undergo background checks through an approved system, a practice that ensures high safety for students. Parents expect, and rightfully so, that their children are in a safe, controlled environment during the school day. LifeWise, however, is not bound by these same safety requirements, and our district has no authority over its background check process or the curriculum it teaches. While parents who choose to allow their children to attend LifeWise Academy must accept the risk, many mistakenly assume that the district has oversight or approval of these programs—which we emphatically do not.

Additionally, it is crucial to note that no reputable data demonstrates the effectiveness of the curriculum or religious values-based education LifeWise claims to provide. Their stated mission is to "reach unchurched students in public schools with the gospel through a replicable released time religious instruction program," yet there is no concrete evidence to suggest that this approach benefits our children or families in any meaningful way. No lawmaker could, in good faith, support legislation like HB 445 without solid evidence that it serves the genuine interests of our students.

Furthermore, addressing these programs' operational strain on our district is essential. There is no feasible way for such programs to take students from school during the day without costing the district valuable staff time and attention. When students leave or return, district staff must coordinate to ensure they are accounted for and safe. Additionally, we have observed efforts by groups like LifeWise to influence students on school grounds. Techniques such as distributing shirts that resemble uniforms create unnecessary social pressures, making other students feel excluded or compelled to join, effectively fostering tribalism within the school environment. District staff are inevitably drawn into monitoring and managing these disruptions, meaning that these programs come at a real cost to our schools—both in terms of staff resources and school climate.

HB 445 presents itself as promoting "parental rights" and "local control," yet it would effectively open the door to increased ideological influence in our schools. By giving groups like LifeWise a foothold, this bill risks blurring the lines between education and religious instruction, and it challenges our commitment to keep public education secular, inclusive, and nonpartisan.

I am also concerned that HB 445 aligns with a broader campaign to destabilize public education and make it more vulnerable to privatization. By introducing divisive agendas into our public schools, the sponsors of HB 445 risk creating the kind of turmoil that opens the door to alternatives that serve only a subset of families, leaving our most vulnerable students behind. This disruption, in turn, facilitates a "school choice" agenda that drains public dollars from our schools to benefit private institutions.

The passage of HB 445 would be a tipping point, undermining the foundational principle that public education serves all children equally, regardless of their backgrounds or beliefs. Our schools are a place for learning, critical thinking, and community-building—not ideological battlegrounds.

In closing, I urge the members of this committee to oppose HB 445. Let us uphold our public education system's integrity, impartiality, and dedication to serving the educational needs of every child. Together, we can protect our schools from undue influence, ensuring they remain safe and inclusive spaces for all students.

I appreciate your consideration.