

House Bill 445 “Release for Religious Instruction”

Melissa Meyer

Opponent Testimony

House Primary and Secondary Education Committee

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Chair Manning and Esteemed Members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee,

I extend my gratitude for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Melissa Meyer, and for the past 2 decades I have had the privilege of serving as a mathematics educator at the Berea City School District. It is with a deep sense of concern that I write to you to vehemently oppose House Bill 445.

At the heart of my opposition lies a pivotal distinction: the substitution of "may" with "shall" within the bill's language. This seemingly subtle alteration carries profound implications. "May" connotes discretion, implying an optional action or the authority to choose whether to act. Conversely, "shall" denotes a mandate, leaving no room for discretion and imposing an obligatory course of action. By making the provisions of HB 445 compulsory rather than discretionary, it encroaches upon the autonomy of educational institutions and represents an unwarranted overreach.

It is imperative to emphasize that every child deserves an educational environment that fosters a sense of safety, inclusivity, and mutual respect. However, HB 445 threatens to disrupt this delicate balance by potentially sowing divisions among students based on their religious affiliations. Such divisions could lead to feelings of exclusion and, regrettably, even instances of bullying directed towards those who do not partake in the prescribed religious instruction or belong to minority faiths. Public schools are intended to be bastions of inclusivity, welcoming students from all walks of life. Yet, HB 445 runs counter to these fundamental principles by introducing a divisive element that undermines the very fabric of our educational system.

Moreover, the bill's provision allowing external organizations like Lifewise.org to administer religious instruction raises significant concerns regarding oversight and accountability. Pertinent issues such as *volunteer background checks*, *transportation*

safety, and mechanisms for reporting misconduct demand meticulous consideration to safeguard the well-being of participating students, particularly those of **elementary** age.

Furthermore, HB 445's potential to disrupt academic progress by excusing students from vital subjects, including important time such as lunch, for religious instruction raises questions about equitable distribution of instructional time and the evaluation standards for religious versus secular education. By depriving students of valuable educational opportunities, the bill compromises their academic development and undermines the integrity of our public school system.

Additionally, it's crucial to recognize that parents who prefer a religious education for their child already have recourse through the EdChoice voucher system. This system provides families with the means to enroll their children in religious schools that align with their beliefs, thereby preserving the autonomy of both religious and secular educational institutions. Introducing mandatory religious instruction within public schools not only infringes upon the rights of families who prefer a secular education but also renders the EdChoice program redundant, casting doubt on the necessity and efficacy of HB 445.

Notably, the insistence on conducting religious instruction during school hours raises legitimate questions about the motivations behind this decision. Why must such instruction intrude upon crucial learning time when alternative arrangements, such as after-school clubs, could suffice? This begs the question of whether the bill's proponents seek to foster a deliberate division among public school children, a notion antithetical to the principles of inclusivity and secularism that underpin our educational ethos.

In conclusion, HB 445 poses a grave threat to the principles of inclusivity, safety, and academic excellence within our public school system. As stewards of education, it is incumbent upon us to prioritize the diverse needs and rights of all students and families while steadfastly upholding the separation of church and state. I implore you to consider the ramifications of this bill earnestly and to stand on the side of inclusivity, secularism, and educational integrity.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of my testimony.

Sincerely,

Melissa Meyer