

November 10, 2024

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the Primary and Secondary Education Committee:

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Jenfer Schrock (she/her), and I am a member of the New Philadelphia City Schools Board of Education. I am writing to oppose HB 445 which would eliminate school districts' autonomy to make educational practices that best serve their communities.

New Philadelphia City Schools faced the potential infiltration of LifeWise Academy this fall. Our community went into an uproar, with most citizens opposing LifeWise Academy. Due to the current language in the ORC our board was able to vote to repeal our current RTRI policy as a measure to answer the community outcry. If HB 445 had passed prior to this, we would not have been able to make the decision most of our district wanted. If HB 445 passes, our district will not be able to protect our students from outside agencies wanting to take our students away from their educational experience. We would be forced to have a policy that would allow any outside entity claiming to be religious to have access to our children. New Philadelphia City Schools has a tough volunteer policy. Any adult who has regular contact with our students must complete a BCI, this includes parents who want to volunteer in their own child's classroom. Many religious organizations do not make their volunteers complete a BCI, so the passage of HB 445 would allow our children to fall into the hands of potential predators. Outside entities, like LifeWise Academy, want to pull children out of their specials classes, like music, art and physical education; or take them during lunch or recess. Specials courses are vital in the development and education of the whole person and should not be taken away from children. For many of our students, lunch is the only healthy meal they receive. If they are forced to leave during lunch, they risk going hungry for the day. Recess is vital in gross motor development and pulling children away from that time stunts appropriate childhood development and could potentially negatively impact the child's physical health for the rest of their life.

Our community is mainly composed of members of our various local churches, so while religion is a priority to many families in our community, community members and several faith leaders oppose HB 445 because it should not be the responsibility of the public school system to monitor which students are leaving religious instruction. Religious instruction should be up to the family and a family practice, and HB 445 would force districts to allow outside agencies, such as LifeWise Academy, to take children off school property who do not believe in including parents in their program or giving them access to their curriculum.

School districts in Ohio already face enough challenges and there is already a strain on resources. Passing HB 445 will make it more difficult for teachers, school receptionists and principals to keep track of every student's schedule. Leaving the language as is will allow school districts who wish to have a released time for religious education policy and will give the school districts who do not wish to have a policy the freedom to continue as is. Forcing districts to create a policy that is not needed to benefit the education of students is fiscally irresponsible as it will be a financial burden on the districts to create such policy. I ask that you please consider my testimony and vote no on HB 445.

Thank you,

Jennifer Schrock