

November 10, 2024

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

I am writing to express my strong opposition to House Bill 445, as both a dedicated lifelong educator and a concerned parent. This bill, which mandates that school districts adopt policies allowing students to be excused for "released time" religious instruction, has significant implications for public education and raises deep concerns about the role of religious instruction within our secular school system.

Our public schools were founded on the principle of separating church and state, a cornerstone of our democracy that safeguards both religious freedom and the integrity of our educational system. House Bill 445 directly challenges this separation by requiring public school districts to implement policies that support excusing students for religious instruction. While this bill does not allocate public funds for religious courses, the administrative responsibility placed on public schools effectively endorses religious education within a system that should remain secular and inclusive. Embedding religious instruction in public school policy can set a dangerous precedent, potentially leading to increased involvement of religious institutions in public education, which ultimately undermines the neutrality our schools strive to maintain.

Today's public school curriculum is densely packed, as educators work tirelessly to meet rigorous state standards across core subjects and the broader curriculum that enriches students' education, such as art, music, and physical education (or "specials"). While HB 445 prohibits students from being excused from core curriculum classes, allowing them to miss specials still negatively impacts their learning. Specials provide critical benefits, helping students develop creativity, physical health, and social skills—elements that are as integral to a well-rounded education as core academic subjects. Removing students from these classes to attend religious instruction risks depriving them of opportunities for personal and creative growth, ultimately diminishing the quality and balance of their education. As an educator, I am deeply concerned that this lost instructional time will have long-term impacts on students' development and engagement with learning.

As a parent, I value the right to guide my children's religious education outside of the school setting. This is why we are members of a local church, where our entire family is very active. The role of public schools is to provide a strong, inclusive academic foundation accessible to all students, regardless of their religious affiliations. Families already have ample opportunities to provide religious instruction outside of school hours through churches, religious organizations, and family practices. Requiring schools to accommodate religious instruction within the public school day infringes on this parental prerogative and forces public institutions to structure academic time around religious considerations that belong outside the educational sphere.

Teachers and school administrators are already stretched thin managing curriculum demands, assessments, and student well-being. HB 445 would place an additional administrative burden on public schools by requiring them to track and accommodate students' absences for religious

instruction, manage missed schoolwork, and ensure these students do not fall behind. This additional complexity detracts from the limited resources we have to support high-quality instruction, exacerbating challenges in a system already facing teacher shortages, limited funding, and growing expectations.

Introducing religious release time policies in public schools creates potential divisions among students, where those who participate in released time for religious instruction may experience preferential treatment or, conversely, isolation from their peers who do not. Public education should be a unifying force that respects all students' backgrounds, and it should not impose policies that risk segregating students based on religious participation. Requiring public schools to facilitate time away for religious instruction disrupts the school community, ultimately detracting from a cohesive, inclusive environment where all students can feel equally supported and valued.

In conclusion, I urge you to oppose HB 445 and protect the foundational principles of our public education system: neutrality, inclusivity, and academic focus. Let us prioritize policies that support comprehensive, secular, and inclusive education for all students, free from the obligations and complications introduced by mandating religious release time policies.

Thank you for considering my testimony.

Sincerely,
Sarah Kaka