

I write today in testimony against HB 445, which concerns school policies for religious instruction. The changing of the word "may" to "shall" has a plethora of implications, particularly for student learning. This change will not just require, but mandate, school boards to adopt a policy authorizing students to attend a released-time course in religious instruction conducted by a private entity off school district property during regular school hours, potentially disrupting their academic progress.

I am a retired elementary teacher who taught kindergarten through fourth grade for 34 years. I saw curriculum repeatedly being pushed down to the lower grades throughout my teaching and often forcing developmentally inappropriate curriculum upon students who still needed to be ready. The biggest example of this is the mastery of reading. When I began teaching kindergarten in 1980, my job was to help five-year-olds become acclimated to a class setting and focus on the ABCs. We worked on letters/sounds. Today's kindergarteners are considered "at risk" if they do not read by January.

Recently, the school where I taught and retired cut back on its lunch and recess time to give educators more instructional time to teach the required curriculum continually forced on them by the state. I'm perplexed about how legislators' support of requiring release time from schools aligns with our ultimate goal: students to be proficient in reading, writing, and math. This bill seems to introduce a contradiction rather than a solution.

Every year, my first course of action in my classroom was to create a learning environment where all students were accepted and create a community of learners. This is one of the reasons I passionately embraced inclusion and worked alongside the intervention teachers in my classroom. A "pull-out" program can only help exclude children from some parts of our unified school day.

Furthermore, there is no reassurance that the religious instruction provided will not have anti-LGBTQ content. For instance, a course might teach that certain sexual orientations are sinful or immoral. How can one build a community of learners when some may be taught to be against fellow students during the school day? What repercussions will educators have for this?

Requiring schools to release students WILL affect the school day. Though the bill states that students are expected to complete work while out of the classroom, any teacher will tell you that some work can't be duplicated or replaced with worksheets. What about guest speakers or classroom project work?

While teaching, I did not verbalize or try to sway my students to my political leanings. I believe in the separation of church and state, a fundamental principle of our democracy. As written, however, this bill allows religious instruction to have content explicitly supporting or opposing specific political candidates or issues, potentially violating this principle.

In closing, I believe in strong, well-funded public schools that live up to the standard of fostering learning outcomes for all children. Please do not put roadblocks in place to prevent that from becoming a reality.