

**Opponent Testimony for HB445**  
**Primary and Secondary Education Committee**  
**11/12/24**

**Rita Hallaveld**  
**Public school parent**

Chair Gayle Manning and members of the primary and secondary education committee:

My name is Rita Hallaveld. I am a proud product of public school, a public school parent, and formerly practiced as a licensed independent social worker. I am testifying today in opposition to HB445. I am concerned with separation of church and state, safety of students, and equity as it applies to a free, public, and equal education for all students.

As Ohioans and Americans, everyone has a right to practice their preferred faith or no faith at all. But no one has the right to push their faith onto someone else's child in a public school. Districts are already allowed to create their own RTRI policies in accordance with the desires of their community. Our government has no place mandating that districts allow any religious instruction to interfere with the school day or be associated in any way with public institutions. This bill does not address whether districts could mandate or exclude specific religious or cultural traditions, of which there are many represented in our schools and families. I have family and close friends who are Atheist, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, or practice the faith of the Native American tribe to which they belong.

The major proponent and beneficiary of this bill, Lifewise Academy, seeks to specifically indoctrinate public school students. I have personally experienced harm from similarly extreme religious dogma and practices, and have provided mental health therapy for many adults dealing with PTSD as a direct result of trauma from religious communities preaching the content that is currently being allowed in programs under RTRI policies. They openly promote harmful ideology around LGBTQ+ identities, divorce, and other politically motivated topics. This often leads to harmful bullying and ostracization of students, and trauma that can last into adulthood.

As a parent, I have grave concerns not only for the emotional safety of children, but also their physical safety when programs such as LifeWise are allowed to take kids off campus, without adequate background checks or other safety concerns addressed. HB445 fails to address these concerns.

Restricting religious instruction to off-campus or only during 'non-core' classes is insufficient to protecting the learning of students. Core classes are defined differently everywhere. In an arts impact school, all of the arts classes are core curriculum. Current law and the proposed legislation neither define 'core curriculum' nor how students' grades will reflect any missed classwork.

Time off campus during the school day can also be extremely disruptive to the learning environment. What happens if a majority of the students in a class are participating in the

off-campus religious program and there are insufficient students to have a meaningful class? The remaining students are essentially punished and robbed of their education. Even lunch and recess are essential to learning, especially social and emotional development. Communication and problem solving are learned by practice, largely during these parts of the day. What happens when students miss this, and then also return late, disrupting the rest of the class? We already have a public health crisis related to the increasingly sedentary lifestyles many of us live. Recess and a healthy lunch are essential to physical health and ability to learn.

We and our children deserve to be supported and protected from discrimination and persecution for our beliefs, and to access education free from any religious indoctrination by the state. Young children cannot reliably tell the difference between school-run or school-sanctioned events and content, vs. something provided by a separate entity. No school should be required to allow any program to use our public education system to recruit children into any religion. LifeWise has been known to send students back to school with candy and other incentives to recruit fellow students.

The currently proposed legislation also does not answer questions about whether religious release programs will have leeway to start funneling funding away from public schools for counseling, after-school programs, tutoring, or other “services provided” that are not specifically the release program. This is of great concern as our public schools are already often under-funded, creating unequal educational opportunities.

I urge you to consider these issues and permanently remove this bill from the committee agenda. Let individual families continue to provide religious instruction in their own homes and faith communities outside of school hours. As school districts are already allowed to adopt a policy on religious instruction release, there is no need for HB445 as it currently stands. Rather, a policy that further protects students from religious indoctrination (as well as religiously-motivated othering and bullying) is in order.

Thank you.