

WITNESS INFORMATION FORM

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Organization (If Applicable): _____

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Business before the committee

Legislation (Bill/Resolution Number): _____

Specific Issue: _____

Are you testifying as a: Proponent Opponent Interested Party

Will you have a written statement, visual aids, or other material to distribute? Yes No

(If yes, please send an electronic version of the documents, if possible, to the Chair's office prior to committee. You may also submit hard copies to the Chair's staff prior to committee.)

Will your testimony be written, spoken, or both? _____

Please provide a brief statement on your position:

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Opponent Testimony for HB 445
Primary and Secondary Education Committee
Nov. 12, 2024

Dr. Philip Neal Whitman
Reynoldsburg City Schools Board of Education

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

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Neal Whitman, and I am a member of the Reynoldsburg City Schools Board of Education. I am writing to ask your support in maintaining a separation of church and state in Ohio's public schools, by opposing HB 445 on released time religious instruction policies.

The organization driving the push for legislation mandating that every public school district have such a policy is Lifewise Academy, an evangelical, Southern Baptist-affiliated organization attempting to install a franchise model of RTRI in every school district. However, the model of RTRI favored by Lifewise is far removed from RTRI's intended use: for school boards to allow individual parents to transport their own children to religious instruction that is simply unavailable outside school hours. This is the kind of situation that varies widely across regions, which is why it makes sense for local school boards to decide whether such a policy makes sense for their communities.

In almost 10 years as a school board member, I have never once received a request from a parent for that kind of RTRI. The only requests I've seen have come from individuals wanting Reynoldsburg Schools to clear the path for Lifewise. And those half-dozen requests are easily outnumbered by the negative reactions I hear and read from other community members.

You may ask why it should matter who is asking to require every school board to adopt an RTRI policy. After all, the policy would not require anyone to take advantage of it, and the school administration would not be promoting it or using district resources on it, right? That may be true for the typical family availing themselves of an RTRI policy, but not with Lifewise. When I was approached by a Lifewise promoter in 2022 with a request for our board to adopt an RTRI policy, their model seemed to me to needlessly create opportunities for toxic peer pressure among kids (while also disrupting their learning time). Since then, I've read [multiple testimonials from families in school districts where Lifewise operates](#), whose children were indeed subjected to exactly the kind of ostracism I imagined, which sometimes metastasizes into family conflicts, as kids tearfully ask their parents why they can't just do Lifewise like the rest of their class. In other words, families might not be required to participate, but there is social pressure on their children to do so. This is especially divisive in culturally diverse communities such as Reynoldsburg.

Furthermore, the restriction on school administrators promoting a program is frequently violated, out of ignorance, misunderstanding, or otherwise, as school districts list Lifewise among their

elementary school weekly “specials” or send home promotional materials in kids’ backpacks. Similarly, school resources are, in practice, used to facilitate Lifewise operations, in school districts where email records show school staff communicating with Lifewise teachers about student discipline or attendance, or including Lifewise presentations in staff professional development days.

Local school boards need the flexibility to adopt or not adopt RTRI policies based on the actual needs of their own communities, as requested by those community members—not in response to pressure from well-funded national organizations who see them as “uncooperative” obstacles.

If you value religious expression over religious oppression, I urge you to vote no on HB 445.

Thank you for your time and consideration.