

**Opponent Testimony for H.B. 445**  
**Primary and Secondary Education Committee**  
**November 10, 2024**

**Michelle Leasor**  
**Pickerington, Ohio**

Chair Gayle Manning, Vice Chair Sarah Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Phillip M. Robinson, Jr., and members of the Primary and Secondary Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to submit this testimony. My name is Michelle Leasor (she/her). I am a mother of four school-age children and a K-12 educator. I am testifying in opposition to House Bill 445, to express my opposition to [HB 445](#), which seeks to alter the well-established system of Released Time Religious Instruction (RTRI) by changing the permissive “may” to “shall” in Section [3313.6022](#) of the Ohio Revised Code. I believe this unnecessary bill threatens the autonomy of local school boards. I urge you to oppose this legislation for several key reasons.

There are so many problems with the LifeWise program, one of the major players in RTRI, and they do a pretty good job of trying to make it sound smooth, innocent, and harmless. It's not.

LifeWise claims it is non-denominational. They are Southern Baptist/Evangelical, and there are many even Christian denominations that see that as a problem. I have a letter from a Catholic pastor telling his congregation not to let their children participate in it because it's not consistent with a non-denominational program. LifeWise's stance toward single parents, LGBTQ+, and anyone of a minority faith is especially problematic. LifeWise has also sent kids back to school after their program, telling their classmates they're going to hell because they're not going to LifeWise.

By pulling kids out of school during the day, LifeWise interrupts children's education. When the school's LifeWise enrollment is too large and it's taking place during specials, the kids that get left behind at the school are often left to do busywork. Teachers at the school where kids are removed to go to LifeWise are left without full classes and must repeat lessons (or stop instruction altogether) to make up for times when kids are late back to school after being at LifeWise. LifeWise dictates to the school a number of schedules that LifeWise can bend themselves around to meet LIFEWISE's needs, not the kids' and not the school's. The kids often come back to school sugared up and bragging about their treats with invitations to come with them and candy for the kids they are told to invite. Many times the kids are also rewarded with additional treats for bringing in new recruits to the LifeWise program.

LifeWise's program is anti-science and teaches young earth and creationism. This means that students are in school learning about evolution and geology and history, and then they go to LifeWise and they try to undo all that teaching. Younger kids may not be able to tell the difference between school being factual and the Bible being the Bible. This program also doesn't shy away from violent or problematic books of the Bible. LifeWise posted on their Facebook page where they had 4th graders acting out the story of Ruth and Boaz, and Kindergarteners learn about Cain and Abel, complete with a graphic video about it. LifeWise, however, will not show anyone their full curriculum. They are very protective of it and won't even show it to clergy who request it. Public schools and other organizations readily provide any curriculum and materials lists to those who request.

The training that LifeWise teachers receive can be completed in mere hours, and anyone with a Google account can sign up to take the training. The background checks are weak for LifeWise teachers and even weaker for the rest of the staff. LifeWise teachers and staff are not required to complete FBI and BCI background checks like all other school district staff (teachers, secretaries, paraprofessionals, nurses, principals, bus drivers, cafeteria and custodial staff, etc.).

All LifeWise staff are also supposed to be trained as mandatory reporters (child abuse/neglect), but LifeWise's policy requires their staff to report to their director instead of making a report to the police or Child Protective Services. This is not the way mandatory reporters (i.e., teachers, nurses, doctors, etc.) are supposed to report abuse - they are supposed to go straight to the police or CPS. It's the job of the police or CPS to investigate, not LifeWise and not even a school district. Even if you're not sure about the situation, if you are a mandatory reporter you're REQUIRED to report it to them first and let the authorities figure it out. If a child reports a LifeWise staff person to the school, LifeWise sends an invasive inquiry that asks the school to send details directly to LifeWise and not to authorities.

By having this program in the school, taxpayer dollars are being wasted because for at least an hour each week, students are not in instructional time in school. The schools receive tax dollars on an hourly basis based on how many kids are there during instructional hours. In schools where kids who aren't participating in LifeWise sit and do busywork while their peers are away at LifeWise, there is a loss of tax dollars for at least an hour each week. As it is, schools are dealing with learning loss because of COVID. Instructional time is the sacred cow for every school district, and the logistics of removing students from school and returning them on time threatens the amount of instructional time that students have during school hours. Another waste of money involves students who receive free or reduced school lunch, which is a federal program. Whenever LifeWise removes students who receive free/reduced lunch and provides those students lunch at LifeWise, those students miss their school lunch, further wasting public money.

LifeWise says that students are only missing art, music, physical education, library time, lunch or recess, times that LifeWise calls "non-academic". Those times, however, are valuable parts of a student's education and are core subject areas according to the department of education. Students shouldn't be missing library time. Likewise, music and art class are valuable to an overall comprehensive education and should not ever be considered "non-academic", "non-core", or "extra". Physical education classes and recess help students' developing bodies, gross motor skills and proprioception. These things are especially important to children with ADHD and autism. Additionally, while LifeWise claims that it is able to work around "core" classes and instructional time, the way that schools work, particularly at the elementary level, kids are in art, music, physical education, and library at different times throughout the school day, meaning that LifeWise will be removing and returning kids throughout each school day. Imagine the scheduling and attendance nightmare that the main office has to figure out to send kids out to LifeWise buses and make sure that all children return on time to class - and why should main office staff have to have duties in addition to everything else they already do in school?

For those families who have children with disabilities and/or health issues, LifeWise has no plan to work with those students. Zero. There is not a school nurse available to accompany students to LifeWise (nor should there be because a school nurse works at the school, not off-campus). If a child whose asthma inhaler is located at the school has an asthma attack while at LifeWise, who's liable? If a child with type

1 diabetes has an issue with maintaining blood sugar levels, there is no plan for help while the child is at LifeWise. Students with physical or developmental disabilities will not receive appropriate services while at LifeWise, and this may interfere with the federal Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) law, which states that students who have disabilities have the same right to an education as do students who have no disabilities. Although LifeWise is not a school program, being that it is run during the school day, it should be required to adhere to FAPE but does not.

LifeWise's number one stated goal is to recruit "unchurched" kids. The whole reason they're doing this during the school day is to recruit from a captive audience using peer pressure and treats. They do not want to run this after school because they know they won't be able to pressure as many kids into going. They also don't want to run during recess or lunch unless the school will not budge for other times. If LifeWise really wanted to help families, they should consider providing free before- and/or after-school care for students. During this childcare time, LifeWise could include as much Bible education as they want, leaving public school instruction during school hours. In exchange for the free childcare, LifeWise could ask or require that families attend and support the churches sponsoring LifeWise programs.

Is LifeWise what's really best for all students, and is this a program we really want for our students?

The U.S. Supreme Court's rulings in [Zorach v. Clauson](#) and [McCullum v. Board of Education](#) highlight the dangers of religious entanglement in public education and underscore the importance of schools maintaining neutrality toward religion. The entanglement between public education and religious instruction is dangerous. It also undermines the secular purpose of public schooling. The courts have repeatedly affirmed that public schools must remain neutral on religious matters, ensuring that students are free from coercion or implied endorsement of any religious beliefs.

Moreover, McCollum in particular emphasized that state-sponsored religious programs that occur within public school systems can create an appearance of endorsement, which is unconstitutional. Forcing schools to accommodate RTRI in a mandatory way risks crossing this line, creating legal vulnerabilities for districts statewide.

In summary, HB 445 is an unnecessary and potentially harmful piece of legislation. It threatens local control, violates constitutional principles, and risks undermining the quality of education in Ohio's public schools. I urge you to protect the integrity of our education system and oppose HB 445.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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