

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

[Kristan Horstman, a concerned mother]

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 reading my statement. My name is Kristan Horstman she/her. I am a parent of two young children, one whom will be attending kindergarten in the fall, and one that is currently in the first grade. I am testifying in opposition to House Bill 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 and undermines constitutional principles. I urge you to oppose this legislation for several key reasons:

I am a parent of a special needs child. She was diagnosed with autism at age 3 . We waited a year to have her diagnosed (it was during Covid) but during that year my husband and I did EVERYTHING we could to help her. She has taken speech therapy, occupational therapy, music therapy, equestrian therapy, and has been enrolled in dance and numerous other activities. What we have come to realize is how much inclusion matters. My daughter, Pearl, has not been included in Lifewise. I have heard from other parents in her grade (not class) how they frequently receive flyers for the program in their child’s bookbag, which isn’t allowed in the first place. So it has always left a bad feeling with me.

My child is on an iep as well. In her iep she has goals that are specific to her needs within her classroom. Her teachers, therapist, and her parents help contribute to those. Many of her goals are in relation to social goals, verbal skills, and include her peers to help her achieve them. When the majority of classmates aren’t present this affects her right to a least restrictive environment as she is away from peers, and a free appropriate public education because even if Lifewise isn’t disrupting a typical educational period of school, my child is constantly learning and benefiting during every moment she is in her classroom, and without her peers being present, this is affecting her right to an appropriate education.

It is concerning that the primary motivation for HB 445 seems to be for nothing more than accommodating the interests of [LifeWise Academy](#), a private religious organization. Allowing a private entity to influence state legislation and public school governance sets a dangerous. It raises significant concerns about the undue influence of corporate interests on public education policy. LifeWise Academy and it’s leadership has been very open about directly pressuring legislators to change state law, not only in Ohio, but every state in the nation. They have already

successfully persuaded lawmakers to adopt a “may to shall” language change in [Indiana](#) and Oklahoma.

School Ministries Ohio has been “training Ohio leaders to offer Released Time Bible Education” for almost 20 years, “and in 2014 [...] took the lead to educate Ohio’s legislature” and credits themselves with helping not only pass, but in fact writing the current RTRI law. However they did not submit proponent testimony or publicly speak out in support of HB 445. Their silence on this proposed legislation is another factor that strongly reiterates the idea that this is being pushed by and solely for LifeWise Academy specifically.

I ask that you consider my testimony and vote “no” on H.B. 445 because while we should continue to allow local school boards of education to adopt RTRI policies, we should not require them to adopt RTRI policies for the benefit of private entities that are attempting to gain influence.