

November 10, 2024

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

Thank you for the opportunity to give testimony in opposition to House Bill 445. We are, however, saddened to see that approximately 100 proponents were able to make their case, while only three opponents are allowed to speak. In a democracy, we would expect equal time.

I am Rebecca Batchelor, a disabled Army veteran and former schoolteacher, and my husband Edward Batchelor, an Air Force veteran and former schoolteacher have been living in Champaign County for approximately six years.

The first point we would like to make is that *Public Schools*, under Separation of Church and State, should not be **required** to have a Release Time for Religious Instruction. Students and their parents who want religious instruction can participate before or after school and/or on the weekends. Therefore, it is not necessary to disrupt classes and divide parents to allow groups of students out of school. If parents want to sign their student out, that opportunity should be available, however, the student should be held to the same compulsory attendance policy that all other students adhere to.

My second point is that, in *Zorach v. Clauson* and our own HB 445, (which LifeWise so readily repeats) release time has certain stipulations:

1. The student must have Written Consent.
2. Compulsory attendance is included in the law. Students are required to have a certain number of days in the classroom.
3. Students must also make up missed work.

{Taking students out in groups disrupts the classroom and gives students the impression that school is not important.}

4. No religious instruction on public school grounds.  
{Students of LifeWise are encouraged to bring and read their Bible out loud in public school classes}
5. No use of public-school funds.
6. No coercion from the entity, nor any public-school staff member .  
{Candy and Pizza count as coercion, as well as having a LifeWise speaker speak at a student assembly. Having LifeWise logo and permission slips on a public school website, not to mention a teacher's syllabus, just to name a couple, is considered staff involvement.) This is strictly prohibited and seems to be standard practice by LifeWise.
7. The sponsoring entity takes complete responsibility for transportation **maintaining attendance** and **assumes liability** for the student.  
  
{Why is it then, that LifeWise has parents sign away their liability on their permission form?}
8. No release during "core curriculum." I see nowhere in the bill where "core curriculum" is even defined. It is my belief, as a former teacher, and the belief of some of the districts approached, that all classes are "core curriculum."
9. In HB 445, students can earn high school credit for released time religious instruction. This is not well thought out. Who makes the decision on how credit is assigned, and based on what? Maybe a public-school Survey course of Religions/Non-religions would be a better utilization of student time.

My third point is a question, actually. Who or What is LifeWise? Are they part of a political agenda? Are they truly a non-denominational religious organization like they say on their web page? Are LifeWise staff vetted properly? What is the curriculum, and why is it not available to the public? Why is it that criminals are slipping through their "background checks."

I realize that people look at the idea of a religious organization wanting access to public schools and say, "oh, if we don't, we'll get sued." That doesn't release us from doing our due diligence. Public School Districts should have the option to say

“no” to unvetted, unproven entities to protect students and parents from exploitation. This is an unvetted, unproven entity.

Our vote is in opposition to House Bill 445 and its obvious sponsor, LifeWise Academy. We oppose it and any other unvetted, unproven, divisive entity having access to our students for all of the above reasons and many more. School Boards should have the final say as to whether they have a release time policy.

Please think this through logically. Do your due diligence. The LifeWise organization is dividing schools, parents, and children. Instead of freedom of religion as referred to in the Bill of Rights, we are having our rights taken from us. We have the right to Separation of Church and State, the right to worship what we wish or not at all. Please don't take those rights away.

Just say, “NO” to the change from “may” to “shall” in HB 445, and definitely say “NO” to LifeWise.

Rebecca and Edward Batchelor