

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

Christopher L Nicholson
Resident of 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 Christopher L Nicholson, and I am a parent of a student in the Pickerington Local School District. I am testifying 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.

I am concerned about maintaining a clear separation of church and state within Ohio’s school districts. Though RTRI happens away from the campus of the schools that have interactions with these programs, it is highly improbable that this separation will be fully maintained in practice. School resources are still utilized for these programs in the way of staff time relaying information to students and their families, and organizing the students’ dismissal and return.

Another concern from RTRI is that they will likely cause an association between the two for the students involved, and can end up influencing those students not directly involved via conversations or simple interactions from classmates. There are organizations known to utilize anecdotes between students and displays of merchandise or treats students receive as a way to recruit classmates and force conversations with parents that do not intend to send their children to the program. The entanglement is caused not only at school, but in the homes of the students’ families.

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.