

Dear Ohio House Legislators:

I am writing to express my very strong opposition to HB 445. Current law (ORC 3313.6022) on release time for religious instruction is exactly as it should be; it respects local control. It allows locally elected school boards to determine, through interactions with local constituents, whether release time for religious instruction is something the local community supports. This is why local school boards exist; their members are on the ground in the local community, talking with community members about local issues.

In the fall of 2023, in the Vermilion Local School District, local pastors and supporters of Lifewise began lobbying the school district to offer the Lifewise option. Because ORC 3313.6022 states that local school boards “. . . may adopt a policy that authorizes a student to be excused from school to attend a released time course in religious instruction . . .”, the local school board members did their due diligence. They allowed numerous Lifewise supporters to speak at Board meetings over the course of several months (although their messages were quite redundant), between meetings they discussed the proposal with their constituents, read the letters for and against, sought the opinions of educators and their concerns about disruptions to learning that may occur, and ultimately made a unanimous decision that Lifewise would be a good before or after school activity for children whose parents wanted to enroll their children, but that it would be too disruptive to the school day, and that students would miss too much instructional time throughout the school year. This is exactly how democracy is supposed to work! Why would legislators in Columbus want to subvert and override that democratic process? I know the answer to that question, but I'll leave it open-ended and allow you to fill in the blank.

Since the pandemic, you can barely read any news about educational outcomes for America's students that doesn't highlight the learning loss that occurred as the result of school closures. This year's third graders were in kindergarten when the closures, that Gov. DeWine ordered, first occurred in the spring of 2020. Our students are still behind as a result of missing significant portions of their kindergarten and first grade years when they are learning to read and do basic math. Research indicates that if a student doesn't learn to read on grade level by the end of third grade, they have a 74% chance of never reading on grade level. Our students who are 1, 2, and 3 years behind grade level, require extensive reading remediation. The only way to catch-up students who are behind is by providing them with remedial instruction every day in addition to their regular classroom instruction. Thus, there are no times within our school schedules where it is “convenient” to have students taken out of the school for an hour. And let's be clear, it will be more than an hour when you consider the time involved in just getting the students ready to leave, which will produce a disruption for all students and their learning, not just those participating in Lifewise, and settled back into their classrooms after having left the school for an hour to play games and eat cupcakes.

I have been a public school teacher and administrator for 31 years; it has never been more important during that time that we maximize instructional time because we have never had more students behind grade level. Our administrators, teachers, and aides work hard every day to

maximize instructional time. The state legislature should support their efforts to do so, not undermine those efforts to meet the demands of Christian Nationalists for the purposes of religious indoctrination.

In Ohio, K-5 students are required to attend school a minimum of 910 hours, and grades 6-12 students must attend a minimum of 1,001 hours. In the Vermilion Local Schools, students attend 1,151 hours per year. There are 8,760 hours in a year. If you subtract 1,151 from 8,760 you get 7,609 hours. In other words, students are required to be in school 1,151 hours per year, leaving them 7,609 hours per year for religious instruction. I would say that Lifewise and other religious organizations have ample time for religious instruction outside compulsory school attendance hours, yet Lifewise absolutely insists on taking children out of their schools during compulsory school attendance hours. We do not allow any other groups to interrupt children's instruction during the school day, and an exception should not be made for a group implementing religious indoctrination. The Vermilion Local School Board made this decision, and the Ohio legislature should not impose the will of a Christian Nationalist organization on the democratically elected school boards of Ohio and the school districts they govern.