

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

Hello. My name is Suzanne Horn. I am a proud graduate of public schools and a proud parent of three public school graduates of Gahanna Lincoln HS and The Ohio State University. I grew up in a small rural community in northeastern Ohio in Ashtabula County and moved to Columbus after graduating from college. My husband and I moved to Gahanna in 1989 and have been active members of our community. Our school district, Gahanna-Jefferson, is a diverse community with a strong focus on academic excellence and student well-being. I am writing in opposition to House Bill 445 as I believe it poses significant challenges to our district and others throughout the State. Thank you for this opportunity to share the three reasons I oppose this bill.

First, I believe the decision for religious release should continue to be made at a local level and not a mandate from the state. Our state is comprised of a wide range of diverse school districts: differing in size, diversity of students, diversity of religions and socio-economic diversity. The school district that I attended was a very homogeneous district with little diversity in race, religion or socio-economic diversity. However, the school district that my children attended in Gahanna is extremely diverse in race, religion, and socioeconomics. My point is that every district is different, and the needs are different for the students and their families.

Second, releasing students throughout the day in a large district such as Gahanna is a cause for concern. Our district has 7 elementary schools, 3 middle schools and 1 high school all of which are spread out throughout our community. I question the value of time that the religious release program would provide students with under this scenario. From any location, it would take at least 10 to 15 minutes to get students FROM the schools to the designated learning environment for religious education and another 10 to 15 minutes to RETURN the students back to their schools leaving maybe 10 to 15 minutes for actual instruction. I was a Girl Scout Leader for 18 years. I can with great confidence state that trying to settle kids down and teach them anything in 10 to 20 minutes is not going to have a significant impact. Operationally this just does not make sense. Why take the students out of the building? Many clubs and programs are held before or after school which seems to make more logical sense than trying to disrupt the student's learning environment within the school day with such little benefit.

The third and most important issue is safety. If mandatory, more and more religious organizations will want to have release time. I believe our district currently has 35 different languages and dialects spoken. Numerous releases for religious instruction will cause many students to come and go, opening the district to safety risks. The state of Ohio has provided many grant opportunities to increase safety in our schools; however, increasing the number of students coming and going throughout the day seems to be in direct conflict to student safety. In addition, our district in accordance with the rules for public schools requires background checks for any volunteers working with students in the building. Will religious release program staff be required to also complete all background checks to ensure the safety of students? Will the religious programs protect students from food allergies, and have defibrillators, Narcon and other first aid tools available?

I am not against religious instruction as I personally attended Sunday School as a child. However, I do not believe a MANDATE for religious release is in the best interest of our students and families. Religious release should remain a local decision based upon the needs and desires of the local community. The local districts can decide if students' safety can be maintained and that the release from school can happen with little disruption to the instruction time. Thank you.