

**Primary and Secondary Education Committee
Ohio House of Representatives
HB 445 Opponent Written Testimony**

**Westerville City School District
Kristy Meyer
Board of Education Board President**

Chair Manning, Vice Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony regarding House Bill 445, which would mandate that public schools adopt a policy allowing students to be released during school hours for religious instruction. While I respect the importance of religious education, I must voice my opposition to this bill as written, for several key reasons: education, safety, and resources.

Education

Our public education system plays a crucial role in shaping the future of our children. The time students spend in school is limited, and it is essential that they have continuity and structure to meet academic goals. Releasing students during the school day for religious instruction disrupts their learning environment and takes away from time that should be dedicated to academic pursuits. **This is not a case of "either-or"—students can attend school and participate in religious programs outside of school hours.** There are ample opportunities before school, after school, and during weekends for families to pursue religious education, without interfering with academic instruction.

We must prioritize the academic needs of students within the time schools have to educate them, as public schools are tasked with achieving educational outcomes. Mandating this policy weakens the focus on education at a time when students need consistency and uninterrupted learning to thrive.

Safety

While the bill shifts liability to the religious instruction entity, parents, or guardians, ensuring the safety of students remains a critical concern for public schools. There must be a reliable system for checking students in and out, monitoring their whereabouts, and confirming their safety. **The added burden of managing multiple check-ins and check-outs throughout the day strains already limited school resources.**

For example, our teachers, attendance clerks and administrative staff regularly handle hundreds of emails and calls related to attendance. In one situation, a father enrolled his children in a religious instruction program without the mother's consent (due to a divorce), resulting in numerous back-and-forth discussions between the parents and school staff. In several cases, a religious program initially enrolled students, but the school was later instructed to hold them back because the program wasn't yet ready to start with their age group. Each instance

increases the risk of errors or confusion and places students' safety at risk. In one concerning case, students left the building without volunteers from the outside entity checking out with the attendance clerk, highlighting the dangers of insufficient oversight.

With multiple students checking in and out during the day, there is a risk of losing track of where they are. Requiring public schools to manage this release process, even when liability technically falls on another entity, puts students at risk and makes safety harder to guarantee.

Resources

Managing the logistics of release time for religious instruction requires significant school resources, particularly in staff time. Schools are responsible for ensuring that students are accurately tracked when they leave and return to the building. This requires attendance clerks to update records, principals to manage daily operations, and teachers and other staff to ensure compliance. Constantly changing enrollment, shifting volunteers from outside entities, and last-minute changes in programming and/or student participation in release time put a tremendous strain on school personnel.

For example, schools often receive immediate enrollment updates, sometimes expecting an instant change to allow a student to leave the same day. Volunteers responsible for picking up/returning students and overseeing the religious instruction program also frequently change, adding another layer of complication. This creates unnecessary burdens for public school staff who already face significant challenges managing attendance and student safety.

The bill states that **no public funds or personnel should be used for these religious programs, yet the reality is that schools are heavily involved in managing the process**. This takes away from their primary function—educating students—and diverts public resources to support private, religious entities.

Conclusion

For these reasons, I urge you to oppose HB 445. **The decision to adopt a policy allowing release time for religious instruction should remain permissive, not mandatory, to allow for local control.** Each community in Ohio is different, and school districts should have the flexibility to make policies that best fit their needs. Mandating this policy would detract from schools' mission of educating students, create safety risks for students, and impose unnecessary burdens on public schools, diverting resources away from education. Let us continue to keep education as our primary focus during school hours and allow for religious instruction outside of the academic day.

I have provided copies of emails with student information redacted. These are just a few examples of the thousands of emails we have highlighting the tremendous amount of work this puts on our staff. I respectfully urge and request you keep this law permissive and allow communities to maintain local control of their public schools.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to provide this written testimony.