

## OPPOSITION TESTIMONY FOR HOUSE BILL 445

To the honorable representatives of the Primary and Secondary Education Committee as well as Gary Click,

My name is Zachary Parrish. I am submitting my personal testimony in opposition to HB 445 in writing since, in the spirit of democracy, only three individuals are being “invited” and permitted to present oral testimony. I hope the committee members are all aware of how many people have been waiting for our turn to speak and how disappointed we are in being denied the opportunity to do so in person.

I was born, raised and have been a lifelong resident of Ohio until 2023 when I moved to Fort Wayne, Indiana. Although I am no longer residing in Ohio, the discrimination and neglect my daughter faced directly because of release time religious instruction provided by LifeWise Academy took place in 2021 & 2022 when we were still residents of your great state.

I've been encouraged to share my story even though each of you should be familiar with it already. Since you're involved with this bill I would hope you've all been paying attention to the media coverage of the issues surrounding it. I know Mr. Click is familiar with me, as he didn't hesitate to call me “bigoted”, a “vigilante” and a “hood” during an interview with the Ohio Public Media Statehouse News. What Mr. Click and his friends at LifeWise Academy failed to recognize is the blatant discrimination and neglect my daughter was put through in second grade.

When we went to the school's open house her teachers gave me a full sales pitch and multiple pieces of literature encouraging me to sign my child up for LifeWise. One of the handouts was a classroom schedule of the weekly “specials” rotations. This classroom schedule listed the weekly class as LifeWise, by name. It wasn't listed as an elective or an option, it was simply listed as the “specials” class one day a week right beside Art, Gym, Library/Tech and Music. There was no mention of what the children who didn't want to attend would be doing for this period, so I started sending emails. I was told my daughter would be sent to an uninstructed study hall to read by herself, do make-up work and other busy work activities. This “study hall” as the school called it, also took place in the gymnasium instead of a classroom.

I would like to directly ask the committee members why my daughter can just be tossed aside and neglected to accommodate others religious education? Why is my daughter deprived of an instructed lesson plan unless she leaves the building to be taught about the Bible? Why are these programs being allowed to waste what few educational hours we have in our public school days, for not just the students attending RTRI programs, but clearly all of the students.

When my concerns were brought to the school district by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the school's lawyer immediately responded by saying my claims were all entirely false despite the massive amount of documented evidence proving my allegations to be true.

Further public records requests provided even more evidence of the discrimination and pressure being put on students who didn't participate in LifeWise. In the schools internal emails school administrators were found to be saying students need LifeWise, show teachers referring directly to my daughter and others as "LifeWise leftovers" and admitting there's no instruction or educational plan for the children being sent to study hall.

In addition to this neglect of the school, my daughter also went through relentless peer pressure and bullying for not attending LifeWise classes. When second graders are being shoved into a gymnasium for an un-instructed study hall and being told they're going to hell by their class mates it completely invalidates the claims of RTRI supporters who say the children who don't go aren't affected.

Pretending this mandate has anything to do with parental choice is nothing short of disingenuous. Considering you are the "education" committee, I strongly encourage you to actually protect public education, unless the whole point of this legislation is to further the agenda of dismantling it. It's very clear by the legislative action in Oklahoma, Indiana and states all across the nation, that this copy and paste bill was designed by and for LifeWise to target states which they call "low hanging fruit". Is that what Ohio is? Low hanging fruit ripe for the picking for Christian Nationalism? Do not allow state legislation to be dictated by private entities, that's not who you were elected to represent.

- Zachary Parrish