

Opponent Testimony for H.B. 445
Primary and Secondary Education Committee
November 11, 2024

Sarah Paulett

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

Thank you for taking the time to review my written testimony. My name is Sarah Paulett. I am a parent of two children who have graduated from Revere Local School District in Summit County, Ohio (Revere), and two children who are still attending Revere. I am an attorney licensed to practice law in Ohio.

I am testifying in opposition to House Bill 445, which seeks to replace the permissive “may” with the mandatory “shall” in section 3313.6022 of the Ohio Revised Code regarding school district policies authorizing release time for religious instruction (RTRI) during the school day. The proposed change does not alter existing criteria for operating RTRI programs but changes the local school board of education (BOE)’s level of discretion in regards to RTRI. Current law allows local BOEs to adopt RTRI policies. By replacing this one word, under the proposed law, a local school BOE must adopt an RTRI policy. I believe this unnecessary bill threatens the autonomy of local school boards. They are responsible for making the best decisions for their district communities and I urge you to oppose this legislation.

I have been actively involved in opposing Lifewise Academy in Revere since I learned that they were attempting to enter the district surreptitiously about 6 months ago. I am opposed to any entity that would discourage transparency in their engagement process so that they can keep opponents unaware of their actions and quietly gain access to vulnerable students without providing for their safety, well-being, and academic and social success. No matter their stated purpose, these are political machines. This approach dulls and eliminates government process and allows those entities acting without transparency to achieve their own purpose. When faced with opposition, Lifewise Academy and other political machines are willing to take an “ends justifies the means” approach to interactions with school boards and the community. For example, Buddy Workman a Lifewise Academy Advancement Representative, who is also a Director of Lifewise programs, recently gave a sermon that falsely accused Revere parents who are against Lifewise of threatening to sue any churches who want to be involved. It is dangerous to give them more power when they are already willing to take more than we give. And there will be no way to stop them. Is the state willing to take on the role of managing the violations at each local level, or are we going to trust the entities to do it? Districts that don’t want to take on that risk will not have a choice and may not be able to manage it. We are creating a problem we cannot control when we currently have laws that allow these programs as a school district finds

appropriate.

Further, a state representative telling people that these policies are mandated while simultaneously proposing a bill to mandate misled many school districts in this process of adopting RTRI policies and resulting harm has occurred. This is especially problematic when it appears that this same state representative is a sponsor of the bill and Lifewise Academy is the biggest proponent. We can expect more of the same behavior and priorities from them and other political machines or entities that want to exploit a loophole in the law without really considering if it is legal and appropriate given the facts of the situation at hand in a particular district.

These entities will no longer have to push their way in without transparency, because the state will have given them a golden key to the front doors of our public school system, while “hoping” our children stay safe. Our children’s lives, success, and well-being deserve more than hope. They deserve intention and good decisions from those who we have elected to represent them at all levels. This means that the state government should not adopt mandatory laws that fail to consider their needs and the local school boards should take the time, knowing the facts that surround them, to consider these needs in full when making such decisions. Parents then have the right to choose what happens in their home and in their time outside of school. This is how we protect and serve children.

I am in favor of leaving government process in the hands of those who are meant to have control of it, in this case locally elected officials - the school boards. I also favor building safeguards into the existing law and enforcing the safeguards that have already been set forth in case law at various levels. To consider adopting a mandatory requirement without first doing these things would be irresponsible of our state government. To do so on the will of a private entity is disgusting and reprehensible.

In the several months I have been speaking with people about this, the argument I have most often heard when all other arguments failed is that parents have a right to have a religious program in the schools and then those that want to send their children can. That is not true. While parents have a right to raise their own children according to their wishes, and this includes religion, the needs of the school district must also be considered and outweigh the wish for religious curriculum during the school day. Further, parents who would not wish to have these programs also have a right to be heard. This bill removes these rights in favor of one agenda.

I ask that you consider my testimony and vote “no” on H.B. 445.