

Chair Richardson, Ranking Member Isaacsohn, and Members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education: Thank you for this opportunity to offer support for HB 11, also known as the Backpack Bill.

John Adams once said, “Our Constitution was made for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” In many regards the role of religion and religious freedom in the education of children has been removed from the schoolhouse. Because there is debate of its appropriateness, the moral and religious education of children has been neglected and is held in negative regard by some. However, in Ohio, your colleagues of the 130th General Assembly passed HB 171 (Section 3313.6022) which codified Released Time Religious Instruction into Ohio law, September 11, 2014—with parental permission students may be excused from school to attend a privately funded course in religious instruction conducted off campus.

Since 1914, Released time has had an illustrious history in the United States. In 1952, New York Released Time religious instruction was challenged. The U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Zorach v. Clauson* upheld privately funded released time community programs under the same rules for decades. Ohioans invested many years of service to these programs. Encouraged by the General Assembly’s work and School Ministries Ohio, we formed Heart of Ohio School Ministries in 2018. Then COVID hit. Although the law permitted the continuation of Released Time, some districts suspended programs with regard for the health of students, staff, and families.

With school doors closed to us, we considered other options. Our bylaws included an education clause. We amended our bylaws and articles of incorporation to permit the establishment of a private school. We are in the process of chartering with the State of Ohio a biblically-based, Christ-centered private school. We regretted that our program might not be available to all of Ohio’s children because of financial and social barriers. As parents of five children, my husband and I would have found the cost of private education financially prohibitive. Additionally, since members of the general public might view private education as socially exclusive, I as a former social studies teacher desired a program that would not fail the test of inclusiveness—equal opportunity for all students.

What the Ohio General Assembly is tasked with is a phenomenal opportunity through the ‘backpack bill’ to give all of Ohio’s children and families a chance for a private education without financial and social barriers.

In his “I Have a Dream” speech (1963)*, Dr. Martin Luther King addressed these same concerns:

“We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we’ve come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice...I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character...”

In 1992, Dr. Tom Lickona, developmental psychologist and professor of education at State University of New York at Cortland, authored *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*. Real needs of Ohio’s children have now moved from the schoolhouse to the Statehouse.

Ladies and gentlemen, you are challenged with the task of carving out resources necessary to provide every child the opportunity to be supported and guided in moral virtue as well as academic instruction. Your work will acknowledge parents’ rights and their responsibilities to participate in their child’s education. You have the opportunity to remove economic and social barriers to the process. We as citizens and educators are poised ready to assist. Will you help us and the families of Ohio’s communities?

We will be praying for you as you confront challenges to the State Budget and what the “backpack bill” can mean for Ohio’s future...but make it happen. Give all of Ohio’s children the opportunity for a civic and virtuous education.

*<https://loc.gov/static/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/IHaveADream.pdf>