



EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

President

Mark Barsman

Vice President/  
President-Elect

Ben Schneider

Vice Presidents

Sherri Goren Slovin

Rebecca Zemelman

Greg Miller

Immediate

Past President

Ronna Greff Schneider

Penultimate President

Walter Spiegel

Director

Rabbi Ari Ballaban

Assistant Director

Jeremy Spiegel

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Nathan Bachrach

Rabbi Robert Barr

Debbie Brant

Karen Brownlee

Harvey Cohen

Leo D'Cruz

Mark Dowd

Motti Edelstein

Jon Entine

Bobby Fisher

Mickey Fishman

Ben Glassman

Gary Greenberg

Dani Isaacsohn

Mark Kanter

Michelle Kohn

Julie Leftwich

Debbie Lempert

Maytal Levi

Jennifer Manago

Rabbi Margaret Meyer

Danielle V. Minson

Yarden Neeman

Robert Oestreicher

Penny Pensak

Seth Schwartz

Jenna Shaifer

Kayla Soroka

Rabbi Miriam Terlinchamp

Amy Susskind Weiskopf

Ryan Williams

John Youkilis

Rabbi Gary P. Zola

February 16, 2023

Chairman Brenner, Vice-Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

Last November, I testified to the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee in support of HB 353, the Testing Your Faith Act. That piece of bipartisan legislation—which ensured all students at Ohio public universities had access to three religious accommodation days per semester—felt to me so essential as a protection for religious students as to be almost commonsense. To my eye, it only had one flaw: it covered students who were studying at the college level and not those who were in kindergarten-twelfth grades. As someone who represents the Cincinnati Jewish community, as a rabbi who has worked as a Jewish professional in synagogues, institutions of education, and a community organizer, I can attest readily that there is a desperate need for these protections to be extended to K-12 students across Ohio's public educational system.

It is for that reason that I was elated when my colleague, Howie Beigelman, informed me that Senator Reynolds took the important step of introducing Senate Bill 49 in this committee. SB 49 will go a long way toward ensuring that members of all religious communities, including my own, know that their children can attend public schools in the state of Ohio without having to check their faiths at the door.

As the bill stands now, I see only modest areas for improvement, for which I would humbly advocate. First, I would ask this committee to consider amending the minimum number of days allotted for religious expression days be changed from three to six. That would make it parallel to the Testing Your Faith Act, which prescribes three days per semester to each student. Although that number still isn't quite as many RED days as traditionally observant Jewish students might require in certain years, it seems a reasonable compromise in ensuring only minimal disruptions to our educational system, while also significantly diminishing the burden placed on students from my and other religious communities.

The other amendment to the bill I would ask is more substantive; however, I think it is also vital. While the as-introduced version of this bill provided RED days to school staff members, I understand that this provision was removed due to budgetary concerns. Although this change comes as a disappointment to some in my community, realistically, it is not a surprise. On behalf of the Cincinnatians I represent, I would like to propose an alternative arrangement that would provide similar relief to these employees: a provision within SB 49 that would guarantee K-12 school staff members the ability to use sick days for religious absences.



EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

President  
Mark Barsman

Vice President/  
President-Elect  
Ben Schneider

Vice Presidents  
Sherri Goren Slovin  
Rebecca Zimmelman  
Greg Miller

Immediate  
Past President  
Ronna Greff Schneider

Penultimate President  
Walter Spiegel

Director  
Rabbi Ari Ballaban

Assistant Director  
Jeremy Spiegel

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Nathan Bachrach

Rabbi Robert Barr

Debbie Brant

Karen Brownlee

Harvey Cohen

Leo D'Cruz

Mark Dowd

Motti Edelstein

Jon Entine

Bobby Fisher

Mickey Fishman

Ben Glassman

Gary Greenberg

Dani Isaacsohn

Mark Kanter

Michelle Kohn

Julie Leftwich

Debbie Lempert

Maytal Levi

Jennifer Manago

Rabbi Margaret Meyer

Danielle V. Minson

Yarden Neeman

Robert Oestreicher

Penny Pensak

Seth Schwartz

Jenna Shaifer

Kayla Soroka

Rabbi Miriam Terlinchamp

Amy Susskind Weiskopf

Ryan Williams

John Youkilis

Rabbi Gary P. Zola

Of course, at present, many individual schools or school districts *do* have policies or informal practices allowing staff to use sick days in this fashion, but not all schools or school districts do. In such settings, teachers with religious conflicts must: a) lose pay to take holidays, b) use their limited personal days to take the time off (for some, they may have as few as two annually), or c) be forced to work on holy days in opposition to their religious convictions.

The problem here is real: In the last several months, I have heard from two Jewish teachers in Cincinnati-area public schools who were *not* permitted to use sick days for important religious holidays. One teacher even explained that the situation has “forced her to think about leaving the public school system, even though [she is] committed to serving [her] students.” Both teachers suggested that this proposed legislative remedy would provide them with immediate relief, enabling them to remain within our school systems while practicing their faiths. Additionally, it has the benefit that it would avoid creating new, undue financial burdens on the school system, since these sick days are already budgeted for and in teachers’ existing contracts.

Again, I must praise and thank this committee for the consideration it is providing to SB 49. In most respects, this bill is a straightforward solution to an avoidable problem. But I hope that the two abovementioned recommendations may be taken into account as the legislative process unfolds.

I am happy to stand for any questions.

Rabbi Ari Ballaban

Director  
Jewish Community Relations Council, Cincinnati