

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Senate Bill 293. My name is Britny Focht, a mother of three young boys and I am from Seneca County. Please take action to continue moving the bill through the legislative process. Please help ensure that parental choice—not school officials—determines access to released time religious instruction.

Along with many other parents, I am in support of moral and character education for public schools students. In 2024 a RMG Research poll revealed that 76% of voters support moral and character education for public school students. Nationwide, parents in hundreds of districts have advocated for released time programs to meet this need. Ohio's LifeWise Academy is a grassroots program expanding rapidly, now serving more than 200 Ohio school districts, illustrating strong demand for released time religious instruction.

This is a crucial time and an opportunity to make a significant difference as parents rights are under threat. Some Ohio districts have denied parents access to released time programs. For instance, Gahanna-Jefferson had a released time policy but rescinded it when parents showed interest, highlighting the need for statewide consistency. The Westerville City School Board voted in September 2024 to rescind the released time policy, taking away religious instruction from nearly 300 students enrolled in LifeWise Academy. Parents should have authority to decide if religious education is part of their child's schooling, particularly as many lack access to private religious schools or homeschooling options. SB 293 makes religious education accessible to all students, including those in public schools, without burdening the school or taxpayer.

Religious instruction positively impacts both students and schools. Decades of research indicate that religious instruction positively affects student behavior, academic performance, and mental health. A recent independent study by Thomas P. Miller & Associates found that LifeWise programs improve attendance and behavior in participating schools. Ohio's Opportunity to Act By passing SB 293 this legislative session, Ohio can empower parents, enrich students' lives, and strengthen school communities. Please, it's time for Ohio to ensure that parental choice—not school officials—determines access to released time religious instruction.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to advocate for Senate Bill 293.

Sincerely,
Britny Focht