

Testimony Opposing S. B. 293, Regarding School Policies for Religious Instruction

Dear Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram and members of the Senate Education Committee:

I stand in opposition to making release time for religious instruction a mandate for all Ohio public schools. While I recognize that schools can opt to make off-site religious programs available during school time, I can see how requiring such accommodations could be disruptive for many school districts. For example, every school that has different lunch and recess times per grade will not be able to release all students at lunch and recess, and students would instead be excused from so-called "non-core" courses, such as art, music, library, physical education, and foreign languages. All of these courses align their curricula with state and federal requirements.

How does one "make up" work in art, or music, or phys ed, when these courses rely on live instruction instead of a textbook? Media literacy and research skills are taught in library class. How are those skills achieved if the student doesn't have time to explore the library's in-house resources? How are those core learning skills supposed to be acquired if the student is never there? When it comes to physical education and music, teamwork is often a goal. How can this be achieved if the student is never there to practice it with the group? And how does this impact the rest of the class if half of the students are missing every week, only to show up – and interrupt – halfway through?

Now, it may be that some parents, and even some schools, regard such classes as peripheral. But to many school administrators, parents, and students themselves, such courses are essential, teaching and reinforcing core standards and giving students something they enjoy. A parent may not even be aware that a particular class or a particular teacher is what is keeping the student engaged in school. For that matter, lunch and recess times are specifically incorporated into the day to give students time to relax, socialize, and reset for the rest of their day. Midday religious education undermines that rhythm.

It has been said in prior discussion in the House that "Christianity is under attack." As a Christian myself, I see no such attack, and I know of no denomination that requires religious instruction during the hours that school is in session.

We should not be removing students from a carefully-designed curriculum nor from what may be, to them, the best part of their day. The state should not mandate that school systems upend their plans to make room for what is, Constitutionally speaking, not a core course.

Thank you,
Sharon Hawkes, MLIS