

Opponent Testimony for S.B. 293
Education Committee
November 15, 2024

Sean Diefenderfer

Chair Andrew Brenner
Vice Chair Sandra O'Brien
Ranking Member Catherine Ingram
Member Louis Blessing, III
Member Stephen Huffman
Member Michele Reynolds
Member Vernon Sykes,

Thank you for reading my testimony today. My name is Sean Diefenderfer (he/him). I am a single father of four children with their grades ranging from 3rd grade up to 9th. All of my children attend Fairbanks School District in Milford Center, Ohio. Ever since my wife's battle against breast cancer ended in 2022, I have been doing my best to raise my children as respectful, morally-sound individuals. I am testifying in opposition to House Bill 445, which seeks to alter the well-established system of Released Time Religious Instruction (RTRI) by changing the permissive "may" to "shall" in Section [3313.6022](#) of the Ohio Revised Code. I believe this unnecessary bill threatens the autonomy of local school boards and undermines constitutional principles. I urge you to oppose this legislation for several key reasons:

Arguments from representative Click in favor of HB 445 indicate changing of the word "may" to "shall" is necessary to protect the 1st Amendment rights of children and parents who want to send their children to RTRI programs. This is false as these children will always have the ability to attend religious instruction on their own time outside of school hours. In actuality, this is a violation of the rights of those who do not want to attend RTRI. My children's school has had lifewise operating for multiple years now and since then, they feel ostracized on a weekly basis. My 9 year old talks about how recess and lunch is boring when her friends leave for lifewise and return with candy.

To be completely truthful, I am not against RTRI programs, but feel if they are going to be permitted and/or required, then stricter guidelines should also be required. Lifewise purposefully lives on the edge, intentionally blurring the lines between what is a religious-freedom choice and what is a school sponsored event. Videos exist online of Lifewise leaders stating their goals of becoming recognized as a school-special. They specifically shuttle these children using a school bus to again present the appearance of a school-backed program.

By changing the verbiage to "shall" you are creating and forcing unnecessary responsibilities on schools and school boards to have to develop some sort of program to appease these RTRI

programs. I believe if you are to change the verbiage to “shall” then you must include additional “shalls” and “shall-nots”.

RTRI programs “shall” require background checks for all employees and volunteers who may come in contact with students that is on-par or better than those used by the school district.

RTRI programs “shall” present parents and potential parents the curriculum used in the programs at the request of the parents.

RTRI programs “shall” take the necessary steps to verify registration forms are completed by the child’s parents and/or legal guardians.

RTRI programs “shall-not” use any resources from the school district to advertise or promote their program including but not limited to:

- Advertising with brochures or booths on school property or at school sponsored events
- Providing registration forms (digital or physical) to students or parents from any school employee

RTRI programs “shall-not” encourage their students to become recruiters and entice others to join the program.

For the past decade, RTRI programs have operated without significant issues under the current law. This balanced approach has allowed parents who wish for their children to participate in religious instruction the opportunity to do so while maintaining the integrity of public education. There is no evidence of systemic issues requiring legislative correction. The success of the existing RTRI framework demonstrates that the proposed changes are unnecessary, which is evident by the fact that according to [School Ministries Ohio](#), over 60% of all districts have a policy.

In summary, SB 293 is an unnecessary and potentially harmful piece of legislation. It threatens local control, violates constitutional principles, and risks undermining the quality of education in Ohio’s public schools. I urge you to protect the integrity of our education system and oppose SB 293. Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter.

Sean Diefenderfer