

Dear Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, and Ranking Member Ingram,

Thank you for considering my written testimony regarding SB 293, the Senate's version of HB 455, which would **require** school boards (rather than simply **allowing** them) to adopt policies authorizing students to be excused from school to attend classes in religious instruction.

I recently attended a board of education meeting during which school board members heard input from community members regarding the district's release time for religious instruction (RTRI) policy. Those citizens expressing serious concerns about the district's release time policy (for a wide variety of reasons) greatly outnumbered those present who represented LifeWise Academy's growing incursion into public schools during the school day.

Consideration of such policies belong with local school boards, who speak for their residents - those who elect them, who support the schools, and whose children attend those schools. Such decisions do NOT belong with legislators.

Questions arising at that meeting either were NOT addressed or were inadequately addressed by the LifeWise Academy supporters who defended their program::

- 1) Will school report cards reflect the grades of religious release students who fail to make up work?
- 2) What standards or credentials would a religious release program need to have, and would these standards/credentials vary from district to district?
- 3) How would student safety be ensured while they are not at school? How can we be sure religious release time program leaders are qualified to keep children safe?
- 4) Who would be liable for any injury arising during transportation to and from a release program when private transportation is used? Ohio law says the school would not be liable, but would the release program be liable? Will equipment such as epi-pens, a defibrillator, etc., be available at the release program site in case of emergency, and who will ensure that release program leaders are not providing treats with allergens such as nuts? What happens if a student gets sick while attending a release program?
- 5) Will release program directors, staff, and volunteers be allowed to bypass the background checks that are required in public schools?
- 6) Will release programs be allowed to send kids back to school with candy, presents, or provide fun field trips, etc., which could easily make classmates not enrolled feel jealous, and lead them to pressure their parents to allow them to attend?
- 7) Will students be required to attend a release program if parents have signed a release but they don't want to go? Will parents know what they are consenting to if they sign a release form?
- 8) Will individual school districts be permitted to require religious release programs to represent

only certain religions? Will school districts be able to ban certain release programs (such as Muslim religious release programs)?

9) What happens if a nontraditional religion wants to bring a religious release program into some districts (such as the Church of Wicca, Satanic Temple, Jehovah's Witnesses, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints)?

10) Will religious release programs be able to start funneling funding away from public schools for counseling, after-school programs, tutoring, or other services that aren't specifically part of the release program?

11) For purposes of this bill, what are "core curriculum" classes that students would be allowed to miss for a religious release program? Library time? Gym? Art? Music? Reading? Even if release time is only permitted during lunch or recess, will the release program be required to feed students? What happens to socialization that typically takes place during lunch and recess, especially if a large number of students are excused?

12) What about students who are left behind at school while their friends leave for release time? What will they do during that time – sit in study hall and do homework? Would school districts have to develop new/tailored programming just for students who are left behind? Peer pressure is powerful, and children are vulnerable and susceptible to indoctrination, which can be used as a tool to divide the school community, whether purposely or unwittingly. Why would any public school want to create such additional social and interpersonal barriers in classrooms?

Such religious release programs technically honor our Constitution's mandate that church and state be kept separate (but only technically) by holding such programs off campus. If parents want to send their children to religious schools, that is their right, but essentially bringing a religious program to children during the school day violates the spirit of that constitutional mandate.

School boards have a responsibility to answer all of the above questions and adjust or eliminate their release time policies accordingly. Legislators (aside from those serving on their own local school boards) have no legitimate reason to replace their judgment for that of elected school board members.

Sincerely,

Deborah Cooper