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As a concerned citizen, I am writing to express my strong opposition to Ohio House Bill 445.

First of all, existing law already permits districts to create a policy for released time for religious instruction. There is simply no need to require districts to do so. This bill places an undue burden on school districts to develop and implement policies for religious instruction, diverting valuable resources and attention away from their primary mission of providing a quality education to all students. As it stands, this bill does nothing to prevent students from being drawn into religious release programs with obvious political agendas.

This bill leaves too many unanswered questions.

Will there be any minimum qualifications or credentialing for religious release programs? Can any person simply start a small religious program and use it to remove students from school during the school day? Will there be any safety measures in place? How can we be sure release time leaders do not have criminal records. Public schools must require any volunteer in their buildings to pay for BCI and FBI background checks. Will religious release program directors, staff, and volunteers be able to bypass the background check requirements?

I am deeply concerned that the individuals running these religious "academies" are not vetted by the school district and are not required to undergo background checks. This lack of oversight poses significant safety risks. The transportation of students to and from these off-campus religious classes also presents logistical challenges and safety concerns.

It is also telling that Stand for Truth Ministry, under which Lifewise Academy operates, and one of the primary supporters of HB445, describes itself as a "Christian ministry that exists for one purpose and one purpose only—to take the Gospel to students in America's public schools."

What happens when a non-traditional religion wants to bring a religious release program into a district? Will districts be required to create policies and procedures for multiple religious release programs?

It's easy to see how the passage of HB 445 could become a logistical nightmare for school districts who should be focusing on teaching our students reading, writing, math, and science.

Moreover, there are plenty of opportunities for religious education outside of public school hours. Parents who wish to provide religious education for their children should take advantage of these options.

Our public schools should remain secular institutions, and force school districts to implement policies for religious release time go against the neutrality of public education.

Sincerely,

Nancy Laurence

Hinckley, Ohio