

Opponent Testimony for S.B. 293
Senate Education Committee
November 17, 2024

**Sharon Lecklider, Grandparent and Retired Ohio Public School Teacher
and Dublin, Ohio resident**

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 allowing me to provide my input. My name is Sharon Lecklider. I am a proud, retired, 35 year, Ohio public school educator as well as a grandparent/caregiver to three Ohio preschool grandsons. I care deeply about the quality and rigor of public education in Ohio as well as the upcoming public education of my precious grandsons. I am writing to express my opposition to [SB 293](#), 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 and undermines the autonomy and established local control of our duly elected Ohio school boards. I urge you to oppose this legislation for the following reasons:

As a retired 35 year public elementary school teacher, I am well acquainted with the constant time pressure to fit all required curriculum into the school day. Every minute of the school day is precisely and thoughtfully scheduled to ensure maximum instructional time and learning outcomes. As a public school teacher, if you ever asked me what school resource I wished I had more of, the answer would always be "more time". The elementary school day does not have time for "study halls" and even lunch and recess times have been shortened in recent years to maximize instructional time. Mandating local school boards to allow private religious organizations to necessarily disrupt the learning structure of the public school day with the coming and going of students to these private programs undermines the well established power of locally elected school boards to act in the best interest of their students' academic education and their taxpayer provided resources. For example, I am hearing from Dublin parents in my community that their children's learning is being disrupted because students in the Lifewise Academy program are often late returning to class making the classroom teacher have to *wait* to begin class instruction thus also affecting the learning time of students whose parents have chosen *not* to have their child involved in the program. In other Ohio school districts, it is documented that elementary students whose parents are *not* choosing for them to attend Lifewise Academy programs during their school day are instead given a study hall or non-instructional activities while their classmates leave the building because the teacher cannot move on with new instruction with part of the class missing. Study halls have never been part of an elementary school day because the required curriculum leaves no time for it. The students whose parents are

not choosing for them to go now feel punished with extra “practice work” while the Lifewise students are perceived to have a field trip and come back boasting about pizza parties, ice cream and candy causing additional upset and disruption for teachers to deal with. So again, students whose parents are prioritizing their child’s academic learning are now receiving *less* instructional time in their school day due to the disruption of classmates leaving their classroom for a private, religious program. Lifewise likes to suggest that their program is only held during lunch and recess but they actually push for and often get their program to replace art, music, physical education, library and technology classes which are all vitally important educational components. These classes often end up providing career paths for our students but not so if they are missing them. If we are talking about parents’ rights here, then the rights of parents *not* choosing private religious programs like Lifewise are having their rights brushed aside when their children’s school day is disrupted and vital instructional time is lessened. If local school boards are compelled to open the door to one private religious program with its inherent instructional time disruptions, how many more private religious programs will follow with their additional layers of disruption? Ensuring the optimum use of academic instructional time and taxpayer provided resources is the clear and necessary role and responsibility of locally elected school boards who best know their unique community and its needs.

Additionally, locally elected school boards best understand the varied demographics of their individual communities and are best positioned to work together with and unify those groups within the school community to ensure *every* student learns to their highest potential and feels valued, welcome and safe. Local school boards are most qualified to decide if a private religious program during the public school day adds value to their particular school community or causes division, disruption, othering of students not participating or outright bullying as we have already seen repeatedly in school districts with programs such as Lifewise Academy. Locally elected school boards need to continue to have the power to make the best, locally informed decisions for their electorate. S.B. 293 will usurp that important local authority and I respectfully ask you to oppose it.

When Section 3313.6022 was codified into law in 2014, the 130th General Assembly wisely chose the language “may” instead of “shall” to give local school boards discretion in permitting RTRI. The permissive language was designed to respect the diverse needs and views of individual communities. This flexible approach allows locally elected school boards to decide what is in the best interest of their students and administration while not mandating schools to accommodate a forced implementation of religious instruction. The current language of the law also reflects the judiciary’s preference for protecting local governance from unnecessary state interference.

Please consider my testimony and oppose S.B. 293. Please leave important decisions about when to adopt policy to the local school boards.