

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

[Kevin Thome, a concerned father]

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

Thank you for reading my statement. My name is Kevin Thome. I am a parent of two young children, one whom will be attending kindergarten next fall, and one that will be attending preschool next fall. I am testifying in opposition to Senate Bill 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 the autonomy of local school boards and undermines constitutional principles. I urge you to oppose this legislation for several key reasons:

When I attended elementary school myself, I attended a private catholic school. My parents were free to choose what school they wanted me to attend and what if any religion I would be exposed to. My parents gave me the choice to decide if I wanted to attend a private catholic high school or attend the local public school. I chose to attend the local public school. I believe this choice is an important freedom. Parents and students already have this choice, to attend catholic schools for a Catholic education, or attend Hebrew school for a Jewish education, and so on for other religions. Those parents who do not wish for their children to be taught religion in school are free to send their kids to public schools, where there is supposed to be separation of church and state. Some parents may not be able to afford private education. There are after school programs for just about any religion in my area where students can go, after school hours, to learn religion.

The problem with forcing school districts to adopt an RTRI policy is that every school district is different and unique. I feel that our local elected school board officials, should be the ones making this decision, based on each individual school districts best interests. Public schools should not be forced to allow released time for private religious organizations. These organizations are disruptive to public education, take away time from teachers and school administrators from doing their normal duties, and create a cult like environment where students who attend these private religious organizations during school hours are bribed with candy and t-shirts. Sometimes they are even rewarded for getting friends and other students to attend. Most of the time these private religious organizations are only offered during non-core subjects such as specials, lunch, or recess. This may at first seem great, but the reality is whether your child is attending or not attending RTRI classes, this will cause disruption for everyone. Further, for those that choose to participate in private religious organizations and are no longer physically on school grounds, how can these students continue to be counted in attendance at school? The simple solution is to allow these private religious organizations to conduct their business before or after school where parents are in direct contact with either picking up or dropping off. This

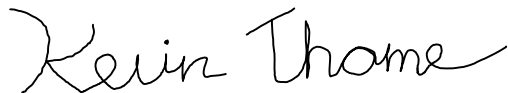
removes all liability from the schools, extra work on teachers and administrators, and any disruptions to students, even those not attending private religious organizations.

It is concerning that the primary motivation for SB 293 seems to be for nothing more than accommodating the interests of [LifeWise Academy](#), a private religious organization. Allowing a private entity to influence state legislation and public school governance sets a dangerous precedent. It raises significant concerns about the undue influence of corporate interests on public education policy. LifeWise Academy and its leadership has been very open about directly pressuring legislators to change state law, not only in Ohio, but every state in the nation. They have already successfully persuaded lawmakers to adopt a “may to shall” language change in [Indiana](#) and Oklahoma.

School Ministries Ohio has been “training Ohio leaders to offer Released Time Bible Education” for almost 20 years, “and in 2014 [...] took the lead to educate Ohio’s legislature” and credits themselves with helping not only pass, but in fact writing the current RTRI law. However they did not submit proponent testimony or publicly speak out in support of SB 293. Their silence on this proposed legislation is another factor that strongly reiterates the idea that this is being pushed by and solely for LifeWise Academy specifically.

I ask that you consider my testimony and vote “no” on S.B. 293 because while we should continue to allow local school boards of education to adopt RTRI policies, we should not require them to adopt RTRI policies for the benefit of private entities that are attempting to gain influence.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kevin Thome". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kevin Thome

419-276-1390