

## **In Opposition to the proposed Bill- SB293**

My sincerest gratitude to the esteemed Senate Education Committee members; thank you for accepting this testimony.

My name is Katherine Schwanitz. I am originally from Columbus and graduated from Upper Arlington High School. I now live in a “small town on a great lake” in Vermilion, Ohio. I am a Girl Scout Leader of Troop 50270, an active community volunteer, and an archery instructor for both Girl Scouts and Erie County Metroparks. I am a mother who has sought to enrich her seventh-grade twins in literature, history, and STEM, to give them a love of learning.

In 2023, Vermilion was visited by LifeWise Academy; at the time, they were seeking to implement a ‘released time for religious instruction’ (RTRI) policy. The local board, after much review and questioning, said no. The representatives could not dissuade them of their many concerns that arose when the program was assessed or analyzed. These same issues have been noted in many districts and pointedly brought to light in Westerville by their board. At this time, the concerns of many remain inadequately addressed by the Academy.

A community needs to have mechanisms in place like what was noted with the local board to stop and adjust policy before it has a chance to create unnecessary negative impacts from occurring. Our school boards decide what is right for the schools. They are the elected officials that we the people selected to carry the burden of administering for all children. These elected school board members are put there to guard the interests of our schools. Each community is different. For some, religious instruction time during the school day fits. For other schools and communities, the instructional day would be greatly disturbed & disrupted. We often hear from the elected officials that they want choice, usually taking the form of: medical freedom, school freedom, as well as free speech. Preserving choice, an ability to choose what’s best for each community is a key freedom that would be lost if the change was made from “MAY” to “SHALL” with SB293.

A freedom to say no.

In other discussions of this topic, arguments have been raised that are specific to the founding fathers & their viewpoints on religion. While others may have stated that the Founding Fathers believed this to be a Christian nation and that Christians are the only ones capable of demonstrating morality, I firmly disagree. For starters, we know that the same Father who wrote the Declaration of Independence went on the record regarding religion’s place in this country with the following quote: “...religious belief, or non-belief, is such an important part of every person’s life, freedom of religion affects every individual. State churches that use government power to support themselves and force their views on persons of other faiths undermine all our civil rights...” (Thomas Jefferson). Key to the

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arguments is the idea that religion is the guiding aspect of our lives, that without it, morality would surely fail. Yet, religion holds no monopoly on morality. Young children, even before they are introduced to a faith, innately know that being hurt unfairly is wrong, that those around them can still be role models even if they do not subscribe to a faith. They do not look at a “is this person religious” checklist before modeling & absorbing the behaviors & attitudes that are shown to them on a daily basis.

This is a nation of religious freedom for all. This element is key in our schools, especially as children should not feel ashamed or pressured about religion on school grounds. They and their rights should be protected. They have an absolute right to practice their beliefs, when not disruptive, on school grounds. First Liberty, a law firm representing LifeWise in May testified that having an RTRI policy was a choice and “not a Constitutional right to have them”. When coercive tactics are used on young children in an attempt to recruit their peers (as pushed by LifeWise), this is not representative of a “choice”. Inappropriate behaviors from LifeWise only further serve as examples to reinforce that school boards are the necessary gatekeepers that intervene when there are problems.

Forcing RTRI policy on schools will allow questionable religious third party programs to create a battlefield of religions on our recess grounds. Specific quotes from LifeWise themselves refer to schools as a “mission field” to “target the unchurched”. As a friendly reminder, the “unchurched” in this equation are powerless minors from a wide variety of backgrounds attending school for a free & appropriate education ([FAPE](#)).

Without being able to rescind the policy as needed (via school board weigh-ins), this disruption in the instructional school day & of students’ religious rights would continue unabated because there’s nothing in the law that would prevent this situation. Once the horse is allowed out of the barn or the cat out of the bag, there currently serves no pathway to undoing the change when critically necessary.

These RTRI programs affect the whole school. This is undeniable as there are numerous allegations of bullying and pressure on students to join. Some RTRI programs are not a burden to their school district. In these situations, I’m glad they have a choice. Let’s preserve that ability to choose. Please do not vote to take away the power that the school boards have in order to support what is best for our schools. They are on the ground level of our communities and can act when needed. We need them to be that final wall or bridge, when it comes to our kids – our greatest treasure. We must protect them all, not just some who believe the same way that a third party thinks that they should.

The question then becomes, what about the parents and kids that want religious instruction in a community in which no policies are currently present? Parents have over

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7,000 hours to include religious instruction as a priority for their children. Schools have less than 1,300 hours in a traditional academic school year. Many educational programs use every minute, including lunch and recess, to promote unity and togetherness with their students. A school board must have the latitude to decide if they can accommodate this policy. A parent failing to prioritize this learning on their time is not the fault nor is it the burden of the school. Should a parent feel that further support is necessary, they should explore their options with their local church programs rather than the public school system in their area.

I hope the esteemed Senate Education Committee members take careful consideration of the points raised and decide to vote “no” on furthering this bill. Please respect our elected officials who were voted in by the parents of their community to safeguard our schools & their specific needs.