

Opponent Testimony for S.B. 293
Ohio Senate Education Committee

November 18, 2024

Dear Chair Andrew Brenner, Vice Chair Sandra O'Brien, Ranking Member Catherine Ingram, and Esteemed Senate Education Committee Members Louis Blessing, III, Stephen Huffman, Michele Reynolds, and Vernon Sykes:

Thank you for allowing me to testify. My name is Melissa Leist, and I use she/her pronouns. I am an ordained minister in the state of Ohio, as well as a Spiritual Life Coach. I am writing to express my 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, undermines constitutional principles, and could have harmful effects on students and their education. I urge you to oppose this legislation for several key reasons.

As someone deeply concerned about the holistic development of our children, I believe The Arts play a critical role in their education. The Arts foster creativity, self-expression, empathy, and critical thinking—skills essential for both personal and societal growth. Replacing valuable classroom time dedicated to these subjects with religious instruction is a disservice to our students. Moreover, prioritizing religious instruction during school hours risks alienating students of different faiths or those who do not practice religion. Public schools must remain inclusive spaces where all students feel welcome, respected, and supported.

In addition, religious instruction should not involve coercion, bribery, or exclusionary tactics, as these can harm children's emotional well-being and sense of belonging. Practices such as offering treats, leveraging peer pressure, or ostracizing students who opt out of religious instruction create an environment of division rather than unity. Religious instruction is important to many families, and they should be encouraged to support this aspect of their children's development outside of the school day. Our public schools should not be a platform for proselytization or religious pressure but rather a place where diverse beliefs are respected and upheld.

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 SB 293. Let us preserve the autonomy of local school boards, protect the inclusivity of our public schools, and prioritize the essential education our children need to thrive.

Thank you,
Melissa Leist