

[Cassandra Bencivengo, Concerned Citizen]

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

Thank you for carefully reading and considering my statement. My name is Cassandra Bencivengo. I am a local parent in Sandusky County. I am writing to express my opposition to SB293, which seeks to alter the well-established system of Released Time Religious Instruction (RTRI) by changing the permissive "may" to "shall." 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:

The governing power over educational policies should remain with locally elected school boards. Local schools should get to solve their own local matters! They know their communities, students, and systems best. Us Parents, and the public schools that we send them to are the ones with our boots on the ground and seeing the disparities and the results of RTRI in schools, which can be different for every district and even every school or classroom. In some districts RTRI use has become widely used, parents, students, and faculty have reported bullying of those who do not attend, lax or nonexistent permission slips or "bring a friend" passes that may mean a parent is not aware their child has left school grounds, and questionable interventions for children with behavioral challenges. These policies, when adopted, are not being used by the minority religions that they were designed to support, rather, they are being used by majority religions, sometimes causing large-scale disruptions in class time and remaining students are left without instructional time in the absence of the majority of the class!

If your child was left to color or read silently rather than receive instructional time, because you opted out of an outside entity's instruction, how would you feel about the public education your child was receiving?

Please allow these decisions to be made by those who know us and our children, and with the input of their own communities.

These boards are best positioned to understand and address the unique needs of their communities. School boards in Ohio derive their authority primarily from Ohio Revised Code Chapter 3313, which grants them the power to adopt policies for the governance of their schools.

School boards have been granted significant governance powers over matters directly related to

the management of their school districts. These powers allow the elected officials on local school boards to tailor their policies to the unique needs of their students and communities.

Ohio courts have consistently upheld the importance of local control in public education decisions, reinforcing that state mandates should not undermine this principle, particularly in areas of policy and operations. These decisions have reinforced the governing power of local school boards.

The Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio School Boards Association, emphasize the critical role that local governance plays in ensuring that public education serves the best interests

of students, free from unnecessary state mandates.

- “Each child deserves to be educated in a way that meets their unique needs. Local school boards, working in collaboration with educators and families, play a pivotal role in creating tailored educational experiences that reflect the values and priorities of their Communities.”

- “Local control is essential to the success of Ohio’s public schools. School boards are directly accountable to the communities they serve, giving them the flexibility and

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responsibility to create policies and allocate resources that address specific needs within the district. Local governance ensures that decisions about education are made by those who know the students and families best.”²

- “Local school boards are best suited to make decisions about the education of students in their districts. These boards understand the unique circumstances and challenges faced by their communities and are able to implement policies that reflect local priorities while meeting state requirements. Centralized decision-making undermines the ability of school boards to serve their students effectively.”

Additionally, in 1988 Ohio Attorney General Anthony J. Celebrezze Jr. put out guidance for RTRI in which he covered the issue of policy governance in depth and stressed the importance of local decision making in OH AG OPINION NO. 88-001 saying:

R.C. 3313.20 and R.C. 3313.47 confer authority upon a board of education, in the reasonable exercise of its discretion, to adopt whatever policies it deems necessary for the government of the pupils of its schools. Thus, whether a board of education should adopt a religious instruction released-time policy is a matter that must be resolved by the board itself, taking into account the particular circumstances of the school district in question and the need within the school district for such a policy.”

Please consider my testimony and oppose SB293. Please leave important decisions about when to adopt policy to the local school boards.

Sincerely,
Cassandra Bencivengo