

November 16, 2024

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram and members of the Senate Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Senate Bill 293. My name is Cindy Reed and I am from Licking County. I write to you today as a parent who wants the best educational and enrichment options for my children and wants to also extend the same opportunities to other parents and children across Ohio.

Because of my Christian faith, I was excited to learn about the opportunity for religious instruction during school time – a chance to add this facet of education without competing with after-school activities such as band and sports. For parents who do not have after-school transportation and desire this type of religious instruction for their child, this release time option is also a win. The beauty is that those who do not agree with the religious philosophy of a particular program can choose not to participate. This is such a valuable option for those who want to take advantage of it.

My personal experience in Johnstown Monroe Local School District is that hundreds of parents supported and strongly desired a viable option for a release time program called LifeWise Academy which had all the necessary pieces in place for a successful and safe program. When we presented our

desire to utilize the current release time policy to start this program, our school board's response was to rescind the release time policy despite a full room of support and oral testimony and NO opposition at that time.

This was shocking because the school board had been presented with a plan by our local LifeWise steering committee that would have provided the program during lunch and recess: ONE lunch and ONE recess PER WEEK per student. Students would not miss any class time at all. At a board meeting overflowing with supporters, many community members spoke urging the board NOT to rescind the policy. But our requests fell on deaf ears. We continue to be saddened and confused. Why are so many others around the state about to enjoy released time religious instruction but it has been cut off from the families in our district. And now, we hear other districts are also rescinding their policies.

I come to you asking you to please vote YES on SB293 to give parents like me and others around the state, the CHOICE to utilize this release time for our children. This is an opportunity for ALL children who may not otherwise have a chance for religious education due to time or money – it is free and a parental choice to allow their child to participate. I am baffled at the opposition that wants to stop something that is not even required of their children. Why is one more OPTIONAL activity during the school day for those who WANT to participate a problem? Even some parents who are not religious may appreciate the CHARACTER education that is part of the program.

If ALL children have the option with parental consent, this Release Time could make a great impact on our community and our society. This has been proven by studies performed by organizations who are currently utilizing release time in other locations.

Release Time for Religious Instruction gives the choice BACK to the parents while preserving the separation of religion and public schools due to the fact it is not promoted or funded by the school district, is off school grounds, and is completely optional for the students. It is OPTIONAL and FREE and does not require a student to miss ANY core curriculum. Please vote pro-choice by voting to pass SB 293. Please vote to give power back to the parents to choose Release Time for Religious Instruction and give this option to all.

Thank you for your consideration and allowing me to advocate for SB 293.

Cynthia Reed, parent, Johnstown Monroe Local School District