

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

November 17, 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 Heather DeWees. I am a parent and a public school teacher. 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 and undermines constitutional principles. I urge you to oppose this legislation for several key reasons:

I was raised in a church and understand the importance of religious time being spent. We went to Sunday school and church on Sundays, and then to church choir and religious classes on Thursday evenings. This allowed for more than enough time in religious education and was something special for our family to do together and in our free time.

The separation of church and state is essential to preserve both religious freedom and governmental neutrality. These religious groups are over-stepping and attempting to force a specific religion on public school students. We have students from 21 countries at our school and represent at least 12 different religions. What would the school day look like if we allowed them all to leave for religious education for all 12 sectors?

We are also responsible for students for the entire day and would be putting our students at risk when allowing them to travel and also being exposed to staff that do not have required FBI background checks. Students will also miss out on necessary educational opportunities.

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. Please leave important decisions about when to adopt policy to the local school boards.

Thank you,

Heather Nicole DeWees