

Opponent Testimony for SB 293
Senate Education Committee
Nov. 17, 2024

Dr. Philip Neal Whitman
Reynoldsburg City Schools Board of Education

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

Thank you for accepting my written testimony. My name is Neal Whitman, and I am a member of the Reynoldsburg City Schools Board of Education. I am writing to ask your support in maintaining a separation of church and state in Ohio's public schools, by opposing SB 293 on released time religious instruction policies.

The organization driving the push for legislation mandating that every public school district have such a policy is Lifewise Academy, an evangelical, Southern Baptist-affiliated organization attempting to install a franchise model of RTRI in every school district. However, the model of RTRI favored by Lifewise is far removed from RTRI's intended use: for school boards to allow individual parents to transport their own children to religious instruction that is simply unavailable outside school hours. This is the kind of situation that varies widely across regions, which is why it makes sense for local school boards to decide whether such a policy makes sense for their communities.

In almost 10 years as a school board member, I have never once received a request from a parent for that kind of RTRI. The only requests I've seen have come from individuals wanting Reynoldsburg Schools to clear the path for Lifewise. And those half-dozen requests are easily outnumbered by the negative reactions I hear and read from other community members.

You may ask why it should matter who is asking to require every school board to adopt an RTRI policy. After all, the policy would not require anyone to take advantage of it, and the school administration would not be promoting it or using district resources on it, right? That may be true for the typical family availing themselves of an RTRI policy, but not with Lifewise. When I was approached by a Lifewise promoter in 2022 with a request for our board to adopt an RTRI policy, their model seemed to me to needlessly create opportunities for toxic peer pressure among kids (while also disrupting their learning time). Since then, I've read [multiple testimonials from families in school districts where Lifewise operates](#), whose children were indeed subjected to exactly the kind of ostracism I imagined, which sometimes metastasizes into family conflicts, as kids tearfully ask their parents why they can't just do Lifewise like the rest of their class. In other words, families might not be required to participate, but there is social pressure on their children to do so. This is especially divisive in culturally diverse communities such as Reynoldsburg.

Furthermore, the restriction on school administrators promoting a program is frequently violated, out of ignorance, misunderstanding, or otherwise, as school districts list Lifewise among their

elementary school weekly “specials” or send home promotional materials in kids’ backpacks. Similarly, school resources are, in practice, used to facilitate Lifewise operations, in school districts where email records show school staff communicating with Lifewise teachers about student discipline or attendance, or including Lifewise presentations in staff professional development days.

It has been argued that by not having RTRI policies, school boards are restricting students’ rights to religious expression. In fact, existing Board policy in many school districts (including Reynoldsburg, policy 8800) states that, “The Board acknowledges that it is prohibited from adopting any policy or rule ... prohibiting any student from the free, individual, and voluntary exercise or expression of the student’s religious beliefs.” At the classroom level, teachers respect this policy by discreetly excusing individual students to pray or perform other religious observances as needed, and to rejoin the class when done. In addition, the recently passed Religious Expression Days law that Senator Reynolds of this committee advocated for, allows further avenues for student religious observance and expression.

Local school boards need the flexibility to adopt or not adopt RTRI policies based on the actual needs of their own communities, as requested by those community members—not in response to pressure from well-funded national organizations who see them as “uncooperative” obstacles.

If you value religious expression over religious oppression, I urge you to vote no on SB 293.

Thank you for your time and consideration.