

Opponent Testimony for SB293

Senate Education Committee

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Deborah Thompson

Thank you for reading my testimony today. My name is Deborah Thompson. I am a retired educator and live with my husband in Berea. I am testifying in 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. The revision removes the decision-making power from local communities and school districts. The policy has worked well for ten years and there is no evidence that it needs to be a requirement.

A specific example of how the process is being usurped is in Berea. Several months ago, three individuals met with the superintendent and provided a list of names, not signatures, of people who wanted a specific organization to begin an RTRI program.

After record requests were made and reviews of the information, it was determined that none of the three who met with the superintendent lived in any of the three cities that comprise the Berea school district. In addition, of those on the list, less than 20% are residents, and very few are parents. The vast majority are over 65. Some of the people who allegedly signed lived over 140 miles away. Lastly, the three nonresidents mentioned were affiliated with churches promoting the program. This is a direct conflict of interest.

The district's parents, families, community members, and taxpayers are not the ones asking for this program to be implemented. Their children will be affected by school day disruptions, and the taxpayers are expected to pay for duties that staff members will be required to complete that are not in the scope of their assigned duties. Who will locate young children in their classes, secure proper clothing and often lunch, and walk them to the designated transportation? And repeating the task when they return? Who will be responsible when they are not in their class or office? Our superintendent has already spent many hours reviewing and researching the implementation of the policy. These are resources not financially supported by those promoting the program.

We are a diverse district, and students have been utilizing RTRI for many years. The policy should be for families, not organizations. Consider the chaos that could ensue if multiple organizations requested release time.

Additional issues have occurred in other districts that have participated in programs run by the best-known provider, Lifewise, including hiring staff with records, not following standard protocols for safety, and holding classes in unsafe environments. Bullying by children attending lessons who antagonize non-attendees by bragging about receiving treats and missing school as well as degrading them about their families who are not considered acceptable by those who are “teaching” has been documented. Claims about improved behavior and attendance have been proven false.

I urge you to reconsider Bill 293. This should be a local decision by school boards who know their constituents. RTRI was intended for families, not organizations. And specifically for those unconcerned about the effect on public schools and communities. There is a reason the policy has been rescinded by districts who have experienced the consequences.

Lastly, this is not about religion. Many opponents of this process are people of faith. There are many opportunities to learn and participate, before and after school, evenings, weekends, and summers. Children need to be in school.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Deborah Thompson

Berea