

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

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Jennifer Brenner. I am the executive Director of Project: LEARN of Medina County, a 501c3 non-profit dedicated to improving lives through educational empowerment. I have been in the education sector for over 30 years, I am the proud parent of 2 Ohio public school graduates who are now college graduates and thriving in their careers here in Ohio. I am strongly opposed to SB 293 and its House counterpart HB 445.

As a proud atheist and parent of two grown children who thrived in Ohio's public education system, I firmly believe that religion and public education must remain separate. Public schools should be a place where children of all beliefs can come together to learn, grow, and prepare for the future in an environment that respects the diversity of their backgrounds. Allowing religion to interweave with public education not only undermines the principles of inclusion and fairness but also risks alienating students who do not share the dominant faith in their community. Religion is deeply personal, and its teaching belongs in the home, places of worship, or other private settings—not in taxpayer-funded schools or classrooms.

The prospect of religious release time programs is deeply troubling. Children, naturally impressionable and eager to fit in, can easily feel pressured to participate in activities that conflict with their family's beliefs. I witnessed this firsthand when my own children were expected to join group prayers before sporting events. While participation wasn't mandatory, those who opted out faced exclusion and ostracism from their peers. This pressure and isolation can have long-term consequences; to this day, my daughter struggles to form strong female friendships because of the rejection she experienced during those formative years. Such practices risk fostering confusion, division, and a sense of isolation among students. Even more alarming is the lack of oversight once children are removed from the protective environment of their school. In these unregulated settings, they could be exposed to risks of physical, emotional, or even sexual abuse—risks that public schools and the state have no means to monitor or prevent. Schools bear a vital responsibility to ensure the safety and education of all children, and relinquishing that duty for religious instruction during school hours is both unnecessary and perilous.

Additionally, if such release time programs are allowed, there is no constitutional way to limit participation to only certain faith groups. By granting this privilege to one religion, the state would be obligated to extend it to all—whether to Mormons, Wiccans, Muslims, or even Satanists. This would introduce chaos, confusion, and potential conflict into public schools, undermining their role as a neutral ground for all children. The U.S. Constitution demands a strict separation of church and state, and this principle has served our nation well in fostering religious freedom for all. Allowing public schools to become entangled with religious indoctrination is both dangerous and unconstitutional.

Public education's strength lies in its universality—a place where all children, regardless of their beliefs, can come together to learn and grow. Keeping religion separate from our schools protects not only the rights of those with differing beliefs but also the very integrity of our educational system. For the sake of all children, we must uphold this critical boundary.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this dangerously harmful and unamerican bill. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

I will now take any questions you may have.