

To: Senate Education Committee Chair Andrew Brenner

Fr: Kathleen Yohn, voter in Senate District 5

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 all for allowing me to share my opposition to SB 293. I am opposing this legislation based on the possible risk for disruption of the school day, as well the risk for division it may generate among students and even staff in our schools.

I am a person of faith and lifelong church attendee, and my partner and I raised our children in the church. But we raised them with an open-ended, compassionate, and non-judgmental theology that welcomes everyone. In 2003 our eldest son's first day in sophomore English class started with the teacher drawing a large cross on the chalkboard and announcing to his captive audience "The Bible says Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve". He started class EVERY DAY by drawing that cross on the chalkboard. And every day our son quietly got up and erased it. Complaints were made to school leadership by myself and other parents but this continued to go unaddressed. Fast forward to 2006 and our second son is experiencing the exact same thing. As a young and busy working parent I again made calls to principals and, once again, nothing was done. While they were both subjected to taunts from peers I was too concerned about fall-out for my sons to take this further, and we dealt with this by having conversations at home.

Fast forward to today when RTRI programs like Lifewise want to remove students for instruction during school hours. I highlight Lifewise in particular as they advertise their program as "character education" which is in reality indoctrination in an extremely rigid, judgemental interpretation of Christian teachings. They also return students to class with tangible rewards, and bribe them with ice cream or pizza parties for recruiting their peers. What 6 year old wouldn't bug their peers so they could get candy or earn ice cream parties? I shudder at the thought that if my sons were in school today we would need to have difficult conversations with them about why this seemingly fun program is not for our family, and that they might be subject to intense bullying by their peers for not attending.

Parents of non-participating children are reporting bullying of their children by their attending peers in large numbers. Others report their children are coming home and reporting their peers are telling them their divorced, unmarried parents, or LGBTQ+ family members are going to hell. Lifewise usually starts their program with the youngest students who aren't developmentally ready to discuss such sensitive and nuanced topics with empathy and compassion. This was NOT the intention of the 1952 *Zorach v Claiborne* SCOTUS decision that Lifewise so often references as justification for what they do. That decision was made so that families who wanted to quietly take their students out for Bah Mitzvah, Bar Mizvah, or Catechism instruction

could do so without their child being counted as absent. The decision was not intended to justify large-scale removal of students during school hours on busses to an off-site location, after which they return to school wound up and wanting to recruit their peers.

This brings me to concerns about lost instruction time for students and disruption of the school day. Districts all over our state are scrambling to figure out how best to address the lost instruction time and disruption, and are responding in widely varying ways. Some like Westerville City schools have chosen to rescind their RTRI policy so they have the freedom to say no to such a disruptive program. Others are making changes to their RTRI policy that limit these programs to taking students during lunch and recess only. Ohio's RTRI law clearly states that no school resources or staff may be used by these programs, making it extremely challenging for districts to navigate logistics of getting students safely to/from the Lifewise bus, accommodating the needs of students' IEP or medical care plan needs, ensuring students attending during lunch get fed, and getting students settled back in to their classroom routine. The latter can be very difficult for young children returning to class with candy or other rewards.

The list of other concerns with Lifewise is long, with concerns for student safety and liability confusion being at the top. Again, our RTRI law clearly states the removing agency assumes all liability for students safety, but Lifewise was previously asking parents to sign a Waiver of Liability Agreement. Under pressure from push-back groups they no longer require this. Push-back groups also uncovered their extremely inadequate background checks for teachers and staff, and they did an upgrade in response to that pressure. These are just a few examples of the dishonesty and shortcuts Lifewise has attempted to take with regard to student safety. And once again, many districts are scrambling to make changes to RTRI policies to ensure the liability and safety concerns get addressed.

Lifewise has generated divisiveness in our school districts and communities across our state. There is a simple solution: offer it before or after school like other religious extracurriculars have done for decades. As a person of faith I have no problem with parents choosing extracurricular religious activities for their child. But Lifewise refuses to do this, and is even attempting to force the Eaton City School District to change their previously offered after-school program to a during school hours program.

Allowing 293 to move forward is putting out a welcome mat to all during school hours RTRI programs. Lifewise is extremely well funded and has remained extremely persistent in pushing their agenda with districts that push back. As Education Committee members I urge you to protect schools and districts from this disruption, and protect all our students from the division and bullying that may result if school district autonomy is removed. I urge you to vote no on SB 293.

