

November 17, 2024

Dear Chair Brenner, Vice-Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Senate Education Committee, Mr. Blessing, Mr. Huffman, Ms. Reynolds, and Mr. Sykes:

I am writing to express my strong opposition to SB 293 and encourage a committee vote against SB 293. My name is Cheryl Hoffman and I am a resident of Franklin County. I am the parent of three public school graduates and the grandparent of six children who will be public school students. I am a semi-retired speech-language pathologist who worked for over 35 years and continues to work periodically in Ohio's public schools. I am a firm believer in the separation of church and state and the freedom to participate in the religious faith of one's choosing.

Coming from my perspective as someone who has been immersed in the school setting for many years, I believe I can address issues that come into play when some students are regularly removed from the school campus for a special period of religious instruction.

When I attended public school, it was not uncommon for our classroom teachers to lead us in Christian prayer each morning and celebrate the faith-based associations of our Christian holidays despite the attendance of the few Jewish students who we were led to pity because they did not believe as we did. When I began my career in the public schools, I worked in poor, rural Appalachian schools where nearly all students were White and practiced Christianity or were of Christian heritage. Prayer over the loudspeaker was not uncommon and Christian religious holidays were celebrated to the exclusion of others. Due to the homogeneity of the population, families had no issues with this and because these were my beliefs, too, neither did I.

After we returned to Central Ohio, I began working in what was an affluent, predominately White suburban school district and we resided in a less affluent suburb that had similar demographics. The population of those school districts quickly began to change. Not only were numerous races and nationalities represented but numerous faith backgrounds were also. I believe this transition has brought a richness to our communities and it certainly changed my awareness of how easy it is for children to feel excluded, less than, ashamed of their own backgrounds, and vulnerable to the comments of other children when the adults in their schools do not demonstrate and foster respect for the cultural and religious backgrounds of families in attendance. Public schools aim, or should be aiming, to create respectful, welcoming environments for all so that the primary purpose of education can be achieved. Parceling out students to various faith-based groups during the school day does not contribute to the social unity appropriate for the diverse public school settings of today. Families are free to pursue the chosen religious education for their children outside school hours and what those children learn will become part of the fabric of the school environment without the young children left behind having to wonder why they aren't permitted to go on those weekly "field trips" that have the appearance of being school-sanctioned, without school staff being put in the position of having to offer explanations of why only certain children participate, and without parents having to deal with their children feeling excluded because of their families' particular beliefs.

In addition to the potentially damaging exclusivity of specific faith-based programs within the school day, there are practical issues that impact the educational day and the staff and students. Schools seek to keep distractions and transitions to a minimum. Transitions between classes and lunch and recesses are planned and well-orchestrated to minimize disruption and maximize instructional time. Limiting the number of transitions students make across the course of the day fosters improved behavioral management and attention to task. It allows teachers to maintain the pace of their classrooms. If students leaving for any special faith-

based programming require any direction or reminders at all; e.g., time to leave, gather their belongings to take with them, walk quietly through the halls, follow established check-out and check-in requirements, reenter the classroom without disruption to other students, etc.; more transitions are being created. A teacher's instructional time is being negatively impacted and other students are being distracted. Unless you have worked or been present in a school on a daily basis, you may not be aware of how strategic school staff are in maintaining a structure that benefits all children. Additionally, burdensome procedures to ensure the safety of students as they transfer between being the responsibility of the school to the responsibility of an outside entity each time they transition between programs are being forced on already overworked office staff.

Advocates of removing students for religious instruction during the school day have repeatedly argued that there is no impact on the students' instructional day since their programming is provided during lunch and recess. As a speech-language pathologist, I attest that lunch and recess are most definitely part of the instructional day. I am confident that occupational therapists, physical therapists, and guidance counselors employed in the schools would state the same. Many students have IEP goals and objectives or specialized programming that can be best addressed during these times, allowing providers to address their needs in naturalistic environments. It is common for classroom teachers to meet with students during their lunch or recess times to provide needed extra academic assistance. If students are leaving campuses on various days, it limits access to these students and/or the ability to create specific programming that allow them to be most successful in the educational setting.

Families are free and always have been free to pursue the religious instruction that they deem appropriate for their children. To maximize instruction and minimize disruption to critical instructional time in the public schools, this chosen religious instruction can be provided outside the school day. If the current more traditional offerings of religious instruction for children; e.g., Sunday school, Youth Group, choir groups, etc., are not believed to be meeting the needs of families or if parents feel burdened by choosing between religious instruction and other outside activities for their children, faith-based groups can certainly be creative. Transportation to and from before- or after-school options including needed daycare on either end of the school day, providing healthy snacks, etc. would allow faith-based groups to fulfill their mission without disrupting the school day or creating pockets of exclusivity within the public schools.

Again, I encourage a vote against SB 293.

Cheryl Paskievitch Hoffman