

Opponent Testimony for S.B. 293
Ohio Senate Education Committee

November 15, 2024

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 for reading my testimony today. My name is Elinore Evans. I currently reside in Willoughby Hills, Ohio and am the executive director of the Palyul Ohio Buddhist Temple in Richfield, Ohio. 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. I believe this unnecessary bill threatens the autonomy of local school boards and undermines constitutional principles. I urge you to oppose this legislation for several key reasons:

One of the biggest problems facing children and youths in today's schools is ostracizing and bullying that marginalizes students and contributes to the rising number of students with mental health problems. We see the results of this over and over, often culminating in acts of violence. In fact, the secret service's own research has shown that most school attackers have been bullied. [LifeWise Academy](#), the only institution that has shown interest in the RTRI option, purports to have nothing to hide, and yet their curriculum is not available for parents, the school boards, or anyone else to review. Doesn't this raise red flags? Having seen sample pages of the LifeWise Academy program, it is clear that the mission is to evangelize and proselytize by using peer pressure and incentives, such as candy, treats, and toys, in order to recruit other students. What will be taught is a very black and white, literal, authoritative, narrow interpretation of the bible based on the Southern Baptist Convention's views. This includes the view that students with unmarried or divorced parents, students with same-sex parents, students with attractions to others of the same sex, or students who don't identify with their birth sex are not to be accepted for who they are. This will inevitably lead to ostracizing, potential bullying, and ensuing mental health challenges. In our Buddhist tradition, the central tenet is to do no harm. We never look down upon other religious traditions or proselytize. However, seeing the potential for harm, unintended as it may be, and having heard about how some students who do not participate in the Lifewise Academy program have been badly treated by some Lifewise Academy students, I request that you do not change the policy language from "may" to "shall."

Furthermore, it is concerning that the primary motivation for SB 293 seems to be for nothing more than accommodating the interests of Lifewise Academy, which is a private religious organization. Allowing a private entity to influence state legislation and public school governance sets a dangerous precedent. It raises significant concerns about the undue influence

of corporate interests on public education policy. LifeWise Academy and its leadership has been very open about directly pressuring legislators to change state law, not only in Ohio, but every state in the nation. They have already successfully persuaded lawmakers to adopt a “may to shall” language change in [Indiana](#) and Oklahoma.

School Ministries Ohio has been “training Ohio leaders to offer Released Time Bible Education” for almost 20 years, “and in 2014 [...] took the lead to educate Ohio’s legislature” and credits themselves with helping not only pass, but in fact writing the current RTRI law. However they did not submit proponent testimony or publicly speak out in support of SB 293. Their silence on this proposed legislation is another factor that strongly reiterates the idea that this is being pushed by and solely for LifeWise Academy specifically.

In summary, SB 293 is an unnecessary and potentially harmful piece of legislation. It threatens local control, violates constitutional principles, risks undermining the quality of education in Ohio’s public schools, and risks impairing the mental health of students. I urge you to protect the integrity of our education system and oppose SB 293. Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter.

Respectfully,

Elinore Evans