

November 18, 2024

Re: Senate Bill 293

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

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Senate Bill 293. My name is Matt Aston and I am from Lucas County. I am sending this message advocating for the passage of Senate Bill 293. My wife and I have sent each of our three children through the public school system in Sylvania, OH. There was no religious release time program available in Sylvania while our children were enrolled.

I heard about religious release time a few years ago, through Jim Tressel – the former head coach of Ohio State Football. After hearing about it, I went home and told my wife, researched programs and began trying to generate support in the Sylvania, OH community to get a program implemented in the school system. We spent considerable time in meetings and talking to people within the community and within a few months, we had 800 people sign a community interest list to get a program started in Sylvania Schools.

We had a meeting with the school administration and the administration indicated this was something that would need to be approved by the Sylvania school board. A few months later, we were given time to make our presentation at the board meeting and while the board did not vote, it was very clear that three of the five board members were opposed to allowing for a religious release time program in Sylvania Schools.

I find it troubling that 3-5 people on a school board can prevent a program from taking place when nearly 800 people in the community they serve are supportive of the program being implemented. The personal views of the members of the school board should not factor into what the community is asking for and what our federal government allows. Why should a handful of people be allowed to stand in the way of that because their personal views do not align?

The reality is many people wind up sending their children to public schools because they simply cannot afford to send them to a private school where religion is taught. In your roles, you are all too familiar with inflation and the rising costs of living in almost every area of our lives. How frustrating would it be for a family who would be eager for their children to receive this instruction, to have the opportunity ripped away from them by a school board, or an administration, and there is little they can do about it because sending their children to a private school would create extreme financial hardship for that family? How much more frustrating would it be to know of friends in a neighboring district, where religious release time programs have been implemented and to see their children benefiting from the lessons that program offers? If we truly want to create equal opportunities in our school systems, a handful of elected board members, or a few appointed people into a local school administration should not be able to stand in the way of options like religious release time.

I ask that you please pass Senate Bill 293. For the betterment of our communities, for the sake of consistency, religious release time should be made available AS AN OPTION – for children whose parents would like them to be part of the program.

I thank you for your service and your consideration on this matter.

Matt Aston