

Opponent Testimony for Senate Bill 293
Education Committee
November 18, 2024
Kara Coates
President, Gahanna-Jefferson Board of Education

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

Hello. My name is Kara Coates. I am the President of the Gahanna-Jefferson School Board, a parent, a community member, and a mental health and well-being professional. Our school district, Gahanna-Jefferson Public Schools, is a diverse community with a strong focus on academic excellence and student well-being. We oppose SB 293 and its House counterpart, HB 445, and believe it poses significant challenges to our district and others throughout the State. Thank you for this opportunity to share the three reasons we oppose this bill: elimination of local control, time available and disruption during the school day, and safety risks.

Elimination of local control – each district in our State is different, and school boards are in place as the policymaking body and chief advisors to the superintendent on community attitudes. It is our job, and we were elected to understand our districts' needs, challenges, and goals. What works for a small, rural district may not work for a large, diverse suburb such as Gahanna-Jefferson. At the House Bill 445 hearing, Representative Click shared that School Boards would still have local control, stating that the bill would allow school boards to decide their policy. He used the example that a school board could choose to have only one day a year for religious release time or not allow an organization to continue if they didn't follow the parameters. However, the wording in the bills does not demonstrate that.

Local control is not about taking control away from parents. Parents have the power to bring faith into their children's lives outside of the public school day. Local control is about understanding a district's unique makeup (demographics, logistics, safety plans, etc.) to create the safest environment so all may thrive.

Time & disruption - there is no free period to allow this time. Many important state-mandated additions are in place and proposed to the curriculum, such as CPR requirements, the science of reading, fentanyl education, STD education, computer, and career education - what goes away to make the time? Some say specials like art, PE, and music, but those areas are evidence-based in improving well-being and whole-child learning. They are not specials but a core curriculum. They create essential neuro pathways. Implementing mandatory religious release time could disrupt these crucial aspects of our curriculum, affecting our students' well-being and academic success. Some might say to use the lunch period, but that is a time students develop relationships with all their peers, which is also central to whole-child learning.

Safety risks (both physical and emotional) - if mandatory, more and more religious organizations will want to have release time. Once approved for one, we would need to say yes to all

interested. In a time when school shootings are frequent, the constant movement of students and different organizations coming and going throughout a school day is unsafe. It will also cause significant disruption to the school day, affecting the learning environment for all students. The disruption is not only the departure and arrival but also students coming back with candy, invitations to recruit, and reported bullying. There is also a liability risk to the district when outside organizations make mistakes - for example when there is shared custody and a disagreement about student participation. SB 293 does not outline any required safety measures. Public schools have to require any volunteer in their buildings to pay for BCI and FBI checks. Will religious release program directors, staff, and volunteers be able to bypass the background check requirements? We know LifeWise, a current organization operating in some districts, has inadequate background checks as they recently hired (and later fired) an educator who was let go from her last teaching job for sexual misconduct with students.

Ohio law says the child's school isn't liable for injury arising during transportation to or from a release program when private transport is used. Who IS liable? How are we ensuring students are protected? Will religious release programs have epi-pens, defibrillators, Narcan, and trained staff available to help in the case of an emergency? What is the policy if a student gets sick while attending a religious release program?

We are not against religious instruction. I attended Sunday School every Sunday as a child. We are only in opposition to a mandatory religious release time during the school day due to one size not fitting all for this kind of policy, lack of available time to do so while not increasing the burden on our educators, and safety risks during the school day, all of which do not equal what is best for student success. When LifeWise came to our district for release time, although our policy does not support time during the school day, we did offer before and after school in our buildings. They turned it down, saying there were too many competing priorities before and after school. There are competing priorities during the school day, too. If time for religious instruction is so important, why would before and after school be out of the question?

Lastly, students' First Amendment religious freedom rights are accommodated in numerous ways during school. For example, they can pray, form religious clubs, read religious texts, wear religious attire, freely express their beliefs, and be excused from school for religious holidays and events. In fact, we have the recent Senate Bill 49 to celebrate, which requires public schools to allow students up to three days of excused absence each academic year for religious observance. These existing accommodations ensure students can practice their faith without disrupting the school day or compromising their safety.

Thank you for your time and this opportunity to voice our concerns and opposition.