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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 Andrew White, and I am from Montgomery County. I am a retired public school educator after 34 years of service, including 15 years as a social studies and English teacher, as well as 19 years as an administrator in multiple districts in the Greater Dayton area. I have dedicated my professional life (and to a great extent my personal time as well) to providing the very best, high quality educational experiences to my students and families. I believe I have been a positive contributor to a great many school districts during my 3 decades of service, including urban, suburban, rural, which has included large, medium, and small learning environment experiences. I have seen a significant amount of changes (some very good and others detrimental) in education in the state of Ohio, of which, many were legislative in nature as this bill proposes.

As a former history, government, and civics teacher, as well as an administrator who oversaw social studies curricula review and implementation at all levels, including as the AP Coordinator and state testing coordinator for multiple districts where I served, as you can guess, I have a great appreciation for our Constitutional Republic, Constitution, federalism, our Founding Fathers, our essential national documents (including but not limited to: the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, the Federalist Papers, and the federal Constitution, including the Bill of Rights, and the Northwest Ordinance), and of course, our Ohio Constitution. Further, I embrace the ideals of self-government, the rule of law, due process, individual rights, and the equal branches of government with defined and limited roles, powers, and authority.

With this being said, I truly appreciate Lifewise Academy's leadership and supporters seeking to engage the state legislative process as defined in our state Constitution in a wise and fair manner. Lifewise Academy has legally followed a federal Supreme ruling and current Ohio law to promote release time religious class for public school students through the petition of local school boards by community-based Lifewise Academy steering committees and supporters at large. For the vast majority of school districts in the state of Ohio that have engaged with these community-based Lifewise Academy steering committees and supporters, they have welcomed the dialogue, researched the law, been due diligent in investigating all logistical aspects of released time religious classes, and saw the comprehensive benefit of partnering w/Lifewise Academy and a major constituency of their community's parents and supporters. Thus, the adoption of a policy for release time was a "no-brainer", both legally and for the purposes to offer quality "choice" options for their parents and students. As Lifewise Academy has provided this Committee and the public at large (overwhelming evidence), the integrity of their organization, professionalism of their leaders, staff, and volunteers, the high quality content, resources, and classroom experiences, and the explosive growth and positive feedback from all parties involved, there is no doubt the Lifewise Academy experience is having a significantly positive impact on individual students, families, and yes, schools.

Yet, even with this extensive, positive track record all over the state (including 10+ surrounding states), there are still some school districts, specifically superintendents and board members, who for a variety of reasons, want to disallow Lifewise Academy and the community's parents and supporters the opportunity, that is legally granted by federal and state law, to have the choice (or "opt in") to participate. These school officials are simply (for diverse reasons, including fear) denying parents and students the right to participate in religious instruction

during the school day unnecessarily and arbitrarily. I have experienced this in my home district, the Northmont City Schools, where our steering committee gathered close to 500 signatures of support from the community, engaged w/the Board and superintendent for almost a year, and ultimately for frivolous reasons, they voted 5-0 to deny adopting a policy for release time. Thus, the roadblock was not legitimate questions of liability, safety, logistics, and/or interest, but instead subjective perspectives by 5 elected school officials that just did not want to bother with our request. Thus, even when there is cordial, collaborative dialogue, overwhelming community support, a pilot plan in place that works logistically, and an effective infrastructure provided by Lifewise Academy and community volunteers, school officials can override the will of a large proportion of parents and community supporters with unnecessary roadblocks.

Senate Bill 293 addresses this issue by amending ORC 3313.6022. A simple yet crucial change—from “may” to “shall”—would require all school districts to adopt a policy for released time, giving parents, not schools, the ultimate choice to decide if their children can participate. As a long time public educator, parent, grandparent, community member, taxpayer, and Lifewise Academy steering committee member, I wholeheartedly support these efforts in both the House (w/HB 445) and the Senate (w/SB 293). Please, pass this legislation to give parents the right of choice that follows directly with federal and state law to provide released time for religious education classes.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to advocate for Senate Bill 293.

Sincerely,

Andrew White