

November 18, 2024

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

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Mary van Balen. I am a former educator, having taught in Columbus Public Schools as an elementary classroom teacher. I also worked in Lancaster, OH public schools as an enrichment teacher, a curriculum director for an after-school program for at risk elementary students. I taught at Ohio University's Kids-in-College program and taught in the Federally funded Even Start program. I also taught theology at Ohio Dominican University. I am strongly opposed to SB 293 and its House counterpart HB 445.

While I am a person of faith, I honor the separation of church and State in our country. Parents have the right to provide religious education for their children but not during public school hours. I grew up in a neighborhood where I watched my friends attend Hebrew school after their usual school day. I attended Catholic schools. My parents didn't expect the public school to provide time for instruction in the Catholic faith. I have taught religious education for elementary students who attended public schools, outside of the school day. This is as it should be.

Public school teachers spend their day addressing the educational needs of their students. Classes are large, demands are great, and time is short. No student needs to be taken out of school to receive religious education.

In addition to this basic objection to pulling students out of regular classroom sessions, shortening time teachers have with them, I am concerned about the transparency of what will be taught in these "religious" ed sessions. Will students be exposed to political agenda (so evident in our political scene today with "Christian" Nationalism)? Will they be exposed to anti-LGBTQ agendas? Will Christians be the only ones given this instruction? What of Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and those of other religious beliefs?

These are dangerous bills, threatening separation of church and State and posing possible emotional and mental health harm to students. Religious education is the responsibility of parents, not public schools. I don't want my tax dollars going to support time out of the classroom, for religious instruction. I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this un-American bill. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

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