

To the Members of the Ohio Senate Education Committee:

My witness slip is attached. My written testimony as an opponent of SB 293 is below.

I am writing to express my opposition to SB293 which proposes mandatory release time from public schools for religious education. I urge you to permanently remove this bill from the committee agenda. My name is Kathleen Swary, and I am a retired Ohio Educator who spent 28+ years in the high school setting.

Some of my concerns are as follows:

**--Release time for religious education devalues education.** Teachers are tasked with meeting Ohio's standards in most subject areas. Students' school days are already packed with required courses, and schools and school districts are held responsible for how students perform on state assessments. In addition, most schools offer physical education, art courses, and music courses among other electives that students can benefit from and sometimes even prefer to those courses with high stakes tests. Young students benefit from built in recess periods for breaks and social interactions. Allowing students to be released from schools for education not within Ohio's current standards will take away instructional time that students need to achieve the results desired by the ODEW on state testing, and schools are still responsible for student outcomes. Allowing students to miss elective courses or even recesses could conceivably cause students to miss courses they need for their physical and mental well-being. Also, taking students out of school, then returning them later in the day simply disrupts education as the students coming in take a while to settle back into the routine, and students who have stayed are disrupted and taken off task.

**--Off-site religious agencies can promote their own agenda with no oversight and without seeking permission from parents to use a preset curriculum.** Currently, the agency that is requesting religious release time (LifeWise) is promoting a fundamental Christian agenda, based on Southern Baptist theology. Within the Christian religion, there are many denominations, and even organized denominations cannot agree on certain points in Christian theology. LifeWise is promoting biased views as absolute truths without

advising parents of their curriculum. The clause “Freedom of Religion” should enable parents to have the right to provide religious education to their children as they believe, not as one denomination believes.

These programs do not have parent or professional review of staff and/or curriculum.

**-- Off-site religious agencies can jeopardize student safety.** Any outside religious organization is not required to have the same rigorous background checks required of Ohio public school teachers. These checks are in place to protect our children. Outside religious organizations are also not required to have the same protections in place for our children: protections for disabled children who may learn differently, protections for disadvantaged or minority populations, protections such as first aid training, active shooter training, CPR training, blood-borne pathogen training, or even available medical staff at the site, not even standard teacher training and retraining as required for all Ohio teachers. Taking public students into a setting with these poorly vetted and trained staff members is dangerous for our children.

**--Off-site religious agencies can promote inequality with those students who do not participate.** In schools where this program is already in place, those students who do not participate and even their parents are sometimes pressured by the LifeWise students and parents to join the LifeWise program, and kids who do not join can be made fun of or bullied. This is not the environment we want for students in our public schools.

**--This bill bypasses the rights of stakeholders in the community.** By demanding that school boards approve religious release time, the bill bypasses community members who might have input either for or against this release and does not consider the views of all the people in a democratic fashion. It is currently written as a mandate that must be approved, not as something for school boards to discuss with their stakeholders. This is hardly a democratic approach.

I strongly urge the members of the Ohio Senate Education Committee to reject SB293 in its current form.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Swary

1420 Arlington Ave.