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ffrfaction.org

November 18, 2024

The Hon. Andrew O. Brenner
Chair
Senate Education Committee
Senate Building, One Capitol Square
Columbus, OH 43215

Re: Testimony in opposition to S.B. 293

Dear Sen. Brenner and Committee members:

I am writing on behalf of the FFRF Action Fund (FFRF AF) in strong opposition to S.B. 293. FFRF AF is an affiliate of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, a national nonprofit organization with about 40,000 members across the country, including more than 1,000 members and two local chapters in Ohio. We work to ensure that our laws remain secular in order to protect the constitutional separation between state and church and to represent the views of nonreligious citizens.

S.B. 293 would remove local control from school districts regarding off-campus religious instruction. Currently, Ohio public school districts can determine whether to allow this “released time,” depending on the district’s needs, the will of parents in the district, and the district’s history with similar programs. Some Ohio districts have recently decided against a released time policy, based on various factors. This is an issue properly decided at the local community level, rather than the state forcing a decision on all Ohio school districts.

The U.S. Supreme Court has allowed public school districts to implement rules permitting students to leave school grounds for religious instruction during the school day, so long as the school district is not involved in the religious programming. However, such programs are an academic disservice to students and interfere with schools’ ability to provide effective education. Parents have ample time to provide their children with religious instruction, and should not do so in place of secular class time.

Particularly concerning in Ohio recently is the sudden rise of a problematic released time provider called LifeWise Academy, which was originally run by Stand for Truth Ministry, a “Christian ministry that exists for one purpose, and one purpose only—to take the Gospel to students in America’s public schools.”¹ LifeWise, too, aims to convert public school students to evangelical Christianity and encourages its students to recruit their classmates for this purpose.²

In 2023, FFRF sent every school district in Ohio a letter detailing concerns regarding numerous reports that LifeWise was having a negative impact on school communities and that school employees were unconstitutionally promoting the religious instruction during class time, or allowing LifeWise adults into school to do the same.³ Concerns about LifeWise and similar programs have only grown since our 2023 letter. In March of this year, we received word that an Ohio school district would take corrective action after Fredericktown Elementary School’s principal led LifeWise’s representatives around the school during the school day and allowed representatives to recruit elementary school students to attend LifeWise’s classes. **When a Hindu student informed one of LifeWise’s representatives that they are Hindu, the representative responded by telling the student that they needed Jesus and said they should ask their parents for permission to come to LifeWise classes.**⁴

At a hearing regarding an Indiana released time bill earlier this year, LifeWise COO Steve Clifton bragged about how 82% of grade 1–8 students at one school district attended LifeWise.⁵ Imagine the coercive pressure if you were part of the 18% of students who did not attend the club, left with busy work or nothing at all to do when the entire rest of the class leaves together, then return with matching outfits and with a promise of an ice cream party if they can convince you to attend the next LifeWise meeting. It is no surprise that bullying has resulted when non-Christian students inform their classmates that their parents won’t allow them

¹ Stand for Truth Ministry, Who Is Stand for Truth?, www.sftministry.org/.

² See, e.g., Mike Hixenbaugh, *Prayer, Bible lessons and a big red bus: How an Ohio group is bringing God to public school* (NBC News, Mar. 25, 2024), available at www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/lifewise-academy-public-school-christian-church-rcna142172 (“Some [LifeWise adults] have promised students ice cream or popcorn parties if they convinced a certain number of classmates to sign up”).

³ Letter available at ffrf.org/uploads/legal/LifeWise%20Mass%20Mailing%20-%20OH.pdf.

⁴ More info available at ffrf.org/news/releases/ffrf-keeps-ohio-students-safe-from-religious-indoctrination-program/.

⁵ Feb. 21, 2024 hearing available at iga.in.gov/session/2024/video/committee_education_and_career_development_3400.

to attend LifeWise, or that many parents and teachers have objected to this coercive and disruptive practice.

Further, LifeWise's classes pose practical concerns for school districts. Since LifeWise's released time program takes place during school hours, students miss valuable educational time by attending, and teachers are forced to account for a portion of their students being routinely absent from class each week. Additionally, Ohio law states that students who attend released time classes assume the responsibility of completing any missed work; however, LifeWise appears to operate by assuming students will simply be excused from completing any school work they miss while attending the bible study classes. This disrupts the school day and has significant potential to negatively impact a district's legitimate academic goals for its students. Given that LifeWise's program is designed to take five entire school years to complete, this means students miss a significant amount of regular course time by the end of the program.

Please oppose S.B. 293. Thank you for considering this testimony.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ryan D. Jayne". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Ryan" being more prominent and the last name "Jayne" written in a more compact, stylized manner.

Ryan D. Jayne
Senior Policy Counsel
FFRF Action Fund