

11/18/2024

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

Thank you for accepting my written testimony. My name is Kristen Sydelko, and I am a family member to retired and current public school teachers throughout Ohio. I am also a parent of three public school students in the Beavercreek City School District, including one student with High Functioning Autism. I am writing to ask your support in maintaining a separation of church and state in Ohio's public schools, by opposing SB 293 on released time religious instruction policies.

One of the reasons I oppose SB 293 is because I staunchly believe in the value of the public school education, where students are able to learn from multiple viewpoints. I believe in the Character Education programs provided in Beavercreek, where students gain a strong base in the core values of caring, citizenship, fairness, respect, responsibility, and trustworthiness. I also believe that the time our kids spend in school is important, with the day structured in a way to provide important educational elements ranging from the sciences through the arts. Disrupting the school day on a weekly basis for optional programming that doesn't support every student would take away from the value of education our students currently receive.

Another reason I oppose SB 293 is based around necessity. While public education and the value it provides is necessary, the primary champion for SB 293 is proposing programming that is already available in other formats. Religious education has long existed before school, after school, or on the weekends. Religious education in the schools has also long existed in the format of private schooling. Parents already have options for furthering religious learning if they choose to do so. If parents really want their children to have religious education, they find the time by the choices they make. Every family is busy, and every family has to make choices in how they spend their time. In my household, one of my daughters had to choose between trying cross country or continuing Irish dance. I offered a compromise of trying cross country and continuing Irish dance outside of the cross country season, in an effort to allow her to do both activities. This example shows that if parents are really serious about a choice, they will find a way to make it happen. That includes providing religious education.

A third reason I oppose SB 293 is due to the programming used by the primary champion for SB 293. If the primary champion of SB 293 offered programming before or after school, it would not be my preference. But I would not be as concerned about it as when it is being offered during school, when the programming appears like it is sanctioned by the school. In researching some of the "lessons" provided by the primary champion, I grew very concerned based on some of the "character education" provided. Based on a document used by the primary champion to answer "hard questions" asked by students and also seeing some of the videos of classes provided, the programming is in direct opposition to what Beavercreek City Schools teaches. One example of the type of character education provided by this group is shown in a video about parables, which was shared on facebook by one of the primary opposition's facebook accounts. In the video, two adults were pretending to show how someone acts if they are "good" (and religious) or "bad" (and not religious). The adults, "Betty" and "Barney" act out different scenarios you may find in school. The depiction of "Barney" is someone who throws fits, steals, doesn't share, is lazy, and other things. In the video, the students are seen yelling at "Barney" and being mean to him. I struggle with this depiction of being "bad" because it could easily be a student who has ADHD or High Functioning Autism. Students with High Functioning Autism can have very delayed

social/emotional abilities and difficulty with regulating intense emotions, especially anger. Instead of showing the students how to be caring and respectful, the lesson taught is that anyone who acts in this manner is bad. Fortunately, Beavercreek has a strong Character Education program, and students are pretty caring and respectful. One of my daughters has High Functioning Autism and struggles with meltdowns due to emotional regulation issues and also delayed social/emotional abilities. She is extremely intelligent, but her social/emotional development is literally years behind her peers. Luckily, my daughter is not treated in the manner that “Barney” is treated by the students in the video. Rather, her classmates are excited to have her participate in groups with them and include her. While it can be hard when she struggles with emotions or doesn’t always understand how to act in a social situation, her peers are caring and give her grace. Another reason I struggle with the lesson is that “Betty” is “good” because she goes to church. This is teaching that students who don’t go to church are “bad.” One of my daughters was awarded the D.A.R.E Character Award in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, an award given to two students out of the entire 5<sup>th</sup> grade class. That same year, she was bullied on the bus continuously by three other students in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. She tried to handle the situation herself, despite being upset every day coming home. It was finally when the students were bullying her about not being religious and also making fun of her for thinking she was a lesbian (one of the ways she tried to handle the situation was to ignore them and only focus on her friend) that I finally became involved. The students bullying her attended church, while we do not. I was concerned that if those bullies were mean to an actual person of the LGBTQIA+ community, there could be dire consequences. The bus driver, principal, and 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers were amazing in correcting the situation and making my daughter feel comfortable again. If this is happening before a widespread program such as what the primary champion of SB 293 is offering, I have a valid fear for what may happen if the programming becomes a required offering during public school.

To preserve the value of public education and Character Education, I urge you to vote no on SB 293.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Kristen Sydelko