

Opponent Testimony for S.B. 293

Ohio Senate Education Committee

November 18, 2024

Dear Chair Andrew Brenner, Vice Chair Sandra O'Brien, Ranking Member Catherine Ingram, and Esteemed Senate Education Committee Members Louis Blessing, III, Stephen Huffman, Michele Reynolds, and Vernon Sykes:

Thank you for reading my testimony today. My name is Molly Gaines and I am both; a concerned community member and the mother of a first grade public school child. I am testifying in opposition to Senate Bill 293, which seeks to alter the well-established system of Released Time Religious Instruction (RTRI) by changing the permissive "may" to "shall" in Section 3313.6022 of the Ohio Revised Code. I believe this unnecessary bill threatens the autonomy of local school boards and undermines constitutional principles. I urge you to oppose this legislation for several key reasons:

SB 293 and HB445 only serve to further erode the separation of church and state, by allowing one denomination to interrupt the public school day, while ostracizing all others. Despite the proponent's assertion that "any religion is free to do so", all of the other major religions that I'm aware of, do not hinge on evangelizing to others and or they respect the school day and see no need to interrupt it. Not to mention, those other religions don't have the money to support such programs or local networks of churches to "support" such a national venture. Thus resulting in a disparity in our public schools. A disparity that is culminating in an increase in bullying, religious trauma, elementary school children being sent to study halls, and crying and begging to go to a program that does not align with their families morals. The latter because it is presented as a "fun party good time" with treats and games and prizes. It gives the clear appearance of school sponsored religion and forces a captive audience to be exposed to Evangelical Christian rhetoric and doctrine.

Lifewise is one of the largest, fastest growing and most concerning, of the recent onslaught of Christian RTRI programs; that these bills are being passed specifically for. By their own admission they seek to "reach every unchurched child in public school". They teach a narrow fundamentalist idea of Christianity; one that defines having sex (and therefore a baby) out of wedlock, as a sin. Defines divorce as sinful. Translate those ideals for my six year old child and her very existence is a sin. My decision to leave an abusive relationship; is sinful. I cannot begin to explain how damaging those ideals could be to both her sense of self worth and her future safety. How grossly inaccurate they are or how offensive I find it that I have to address those things in regards to public school.

Sen. A Cutrona said that SB293 is a "Parental rights bill", and we see that repeated time and again. It is merely a buzzword that is being spouted to get their way, like insolent children, who

only care about themselves. They do not speak for ALL parents. What about MY parental rights and MY child? What of my Jewish, Catholic, or atheist neighbors and THEIR children?

For the past decade, RTRI programs have operated without significant issues under the current law. This balanced approach has allowed parents who wish for their children to participate in religious instruction the opportunity to do so while maintaining the integrity of public education. There is no evidence of systemic issues requiring legislative correction. There is no evidence that any christian is being denied the right to practice their religion; either now or for the case of SB293. They can do so outside of school hours, like all of the other public school families. The success of the existing RTRI framework demonstrates that the proposed changes are unnecessary, which is evident by the fact that according to School Ministries Ohio, over 60% of all districts have a policy.

In summary, SB 293 is an unnecessary and potentially harmful piece of legislation. It threatens local control, violates constitutional principles, and risks undermining the quality of education in Ohio's public schools. I urge you to protect the integrity of our education system and oppose SB 293. Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter.

Respectfully,
Molly Gaines