



Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Joel Penton, I'm the Founder and CEO of LifeWise Academy, and I am here to support Senate Bill 293 because we believe parents should have the ultimate choice as to whether their children can receive religious instruction.

LifeWise Academy is a released time religious program based in Central Ohio serving nearly 400 schools across the state. Each week more than 30,000 Ohio public school students attend LifeWise classes.

Our organization has been growing rapidly because so many parents WANT their children to receive Bible education as part of their school day. As we all know, some parents remove their children from public school to send them to private Christian school or home school, often for the purpose of providing religious instruction. This is simply not feasible for all families. But that does not mean that parents don't want religious instruction for their children.

Our released time programs work with school administrators to find a time for students to attend that is not disruptive to the school day. None of the students who attend our classes miss any core curriculum. The vast majority of our students do not miss any graded class of any kind. For example, where I live in Hilliard, OH, our LifeWise students are released during lunch and recess time once per week to attend our classes

Decades of research show that religious instruction has a positive influence on students. When a child has religious education in their life their mental health improves - anxiety and depression go down. Their character improves - risk factors such as drug and alcohol abuse go down. Their academics improve as well. In fact, a third party study conducted by Thomas P Miller and Associates, (it is included in your packet) reviewed data from thousands of schools across the nation and found that when a school introduced LifeWise, their attendance goes up significantly and their in school and out of school suspensions go down.

In your packet of info you will also notice survey results that show that educators and parents in overwhelming numbers find LifeWise to benefit their students. In fact 99% of participating parents say they recommend other parents enroll their children.

Despite the many benefits of programs like ours, some school districts have denied families access to released time programs. This is a problem. SB 293 will fix that problem.

As you may know, radical activists have begun systematically targeting school districts where LifeWise serves families. They don't believe parents should be able to make decisions for their own children. Sadly, these activists have been successful in a few cases in pressuring school officials to take away religious freedom from families. In Westerville, Bible education was taken away from hundreds of

families. Just last week members of the Worthington school board implied they will look to shut down our program if SB 293 doesn't pass. This bill is urgent and critical to protect the rights of families.

It has been noted that this bill will change one word of the existing law - from MAY to SHALL. In making that change thousands of parents, not school officials, will be given the ultimate say as to whether their children receive religious instruction. However, current law - left unchanged by SB 293 - leaves all of the details in the policy up to the local school district.

What this bill will accomplish is not new or novel. Several other states including Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and New York already have similar laws using SHALL language. In fact, just earlier this year, Indiana updated their law in the same way. Indiana HB 1137 changed the law from MAY to SHALL. We request Ohio do the same.

Thank you for your time. I would be happy to answer any questions.