

Kelly Walk
Parent – Westerville, OH

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of SB 293.

My name is Kelly Walk and I come to you today as a parent who wants the best educational and enrichment options for my children. I also come to you as a representative of 300 fellow parents in Westerville, Ohio and many more throughout the state who share my perspective. I speak today to encourage your support for SB 293.

When I became aware of the option for Release Time for Religious Instruction (RTRI), I was very excited that this could be an option during the school day. With so many competing after-school and weekend activities, I welcomed the chance to CHOOSE a religious instruction opportunity for my children DURING THE SCHOOL DAY. Several years ago, parents in my community organized a RTRI program, reached out to a third party to assist our efforts and persevered through the many challenges of making this program available to kids in our district. Our school district had a policy in place that authorized a student to be excused from school (only with parents' written permission) to attend a release time program.

This program was successfully running for two years and was thriving. Parents had the right and the choice to participate in the programs, exercise their religious freedom, and have a small but important say in their child's educational opportunities – as they see fit for their children.

Abruptly, however, my school district recently rescinded the policy that allowed parents to have this choice and effectively shut down our program, leaving me and many other parents without recourse. We jumped through all the hoops necessary to provide our kids with this option and to operate in accordance with the law. We worked with our school board so that the program took place during lunch and recess, so children did not miss any class time at all. It was the highlight of my kids' week.

Many people spoke at the board meeting to urge the board NOT to rescind the policy. Over 300 children in Westerville had the opportunity to learn important biblical character traits like forgiveness, patience, and thankfulness and these values are important to many families. As parents, we no longer have the right or the choice to have our children excused from school to participate in the program.

I am here today to respectfully ask this committee to give the choice back to the parents. Your urgent attention to this matter is greatly appreciated. Tens of thousands of parents in

this state now face the risk of school boards determining whether their children may be excused from school to participate in these programs that are flourishing throughout the state and the country.

SB 293 simply gives the choice back to the parents while preserving the separation of religion and public schools due to the fact it is not promoted or funded by the school district and is completely optional for the students. Once again, I urge you to vote yes on SB 293 to give the power back to the parents to decide what is best for their children.

Thank you