

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on Senate Bill 293 with regards to Ohio's religious release-time policy.

My name is Zach Vorst. I'm a husband, father, nurse anesthetist, Army Reservist, and member of the Hilliard City Schools Board of Education. I must clarify that all of my comments are my own and that I do not speak on behalf of the Board or the district.

I'm testifying in support of SB 293, which will give access to religious release time, as allowed by Ohio Law, to every kid and family in Ohio. Our district passed a RTRI policy in September of 2022. It is attached for your review. During that process we heard lots of community support about the benefits of having a RTRI policy. We also heard concerns about issues like fair access, logistics, safety, and missed class time.

Adopting policies for the district is a common practice for any school board. With regard to RTRI policy, the current Revised Code permits local boards the flexibility to implement the policy in a way that best fits the district – and that is not changed in SB 293.

Our policy for example includes a requirement for third parties to execute a MOA (Memorandum of Agreement) that may be canceled for failure to meet the standards of the agreement, by either party. Having the policy and agreement in place ensures that the board, the district, the school, the teachers, the parents, the third parties and the kids are all on the same page and ensures accountability for all parties. Our agreement clearly spells out, for example, that:

- The policy incorporates all requirements of ORC Section 3313.6022;
- Requires an approved logistical plan;
- The time period programs may operate (ours is once a week during lunch and recess);
- A student liability waiver and Acceptance of Terms and Conditions for participants, among other requirements that best fit our district.

I'm happy to report, through the excellent work of our teachers, staff, and administrators, that these concerns have been addressed. I was a member of the board when the policy was developed. We easily followed the law, started with a standard OSBA policy and added terms so that administrators could best fit the needs of our district when implementing the policy. There is zero expense to the district, in accordance with the statute. The policy is working well and none of these concerns have come to fruition. Thank you to our team, and to all of the districts in Ohio that have supported students and families desire to participate.

Upon passage of the RTRI policy in Hilliard I emailed local leaders of the Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish faiths, as well as any other faith leaders in our district that I could find to alert them to this policy. RTRI is open to any and all faiths. I'm hopeful that they will take advantage of the policy and enact a program for their respective religions. Ensuring access to every school in Ohio will increase the likelihood that many religions will join in.

In Hilliard we were one of the first (and maybe only) districts in Ohio to make Eid Al Fitr a district holiday. We make a point of allowing our kids prayer space during Ramadan. We have a 20% Muslim population in Hilliard, and I'm proud to be a part of a district that celebrates the dedication that many of our students and families have to their religion. Strong faith-based communities make strong districts, and passage of this bill will further those bonds.

I'm also happy to report that I'm a proud parent of two kids who have attended a RTRI program. I attended a local meeting of parents and was pleased to see so many members of our community that saw a need for an optional faith-based religious instruction course for the kids in our community. I appreciate the ability to choose, for our children, the opportunity to grow in our faith while participating in an educational opportunity. My wife and I are at ease and very happy with our decision to our daughters attend an RTRI program. My daughters have had a wonderful experience learning and growing in their faith by attending. The only complaint from one of them I've received was when my eight year old came home and said "It was great, it was just too short!"

We've seen a few communities in Central Ohio choose to deprive their students and families of this opportunity. It's saddening to hear that. Those kids and families should have the opportunity, as supported by Ohio law, to participate. I respectfully request your support for SB 293 and please vote to move this forward out of committee. Thank you,

Zach Vorst



Book	Policy Manual
Section	Section J: Student
Title	Released Time for Religious Instruction
Code	JEFB
Status	Active
Adopted	September 12, 2022

### Released Time for Religious Instruction

The Board permits students to be released from school for religious instruction consistent with law. Absence during the school day for religious instruction is permitted, provided:

1. the student's parents or guardians submit a written request to the building principal;
2. the private entity providing instruction maintains attendance records and makes them available to the District and
3. the student is not absent from core curriculum subject courses.

The District is not responsible for transportation to and from the place of instruction. Regular classroom instruction missed as a result of a student's absence for religious instruction will not be made up and students assume responsibility for any missed schoolwork. Students are not considered absent from school while attending a released time course in religious instruction. The District does not aid, assist or enforce attendance in a religious instruction program. The District does not discriminate against students who participate in such program.

No public funds are expended and no public school personnel are involved in providing religious instruction. This policy is not intended and shall not be construed in any way, to associate the District with any faith or religious denomination.

Legal	undefined <a href="#">U.S. Constitution Amend. I</a> <a href="#">ORC 3313.20</a> <a href="#">ORC 3313.47</a> <a href="#">ORC 3313.6022</a> <a href="#">ORC 3321.041</a>
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Cross References	undefined <a href="#">IGAC - Teaching About Religion</a> <a href="#">JED - Student Absences and Excuses</a> <a href="#">KJA - Distribution/Advertisement/Promotion of Any Kind of Non-School-Sponsored Literature</a>
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Book	Policy Manual
Section	Section J: Student
Title	Released Time for Religious Instruction
Code	JEFB-R
Status	Active
Adopted	August 9, 2024

### **Released Time for Religious Instruction**

The Board permits students to be retained from school for religious instruction consistent with the law and Board Policy JEFB-R. The following guidelines apply to any released time for religious instruction.

#### **Establishing a Released Time Program**

Newly created Released Time Programs (an entirely new Program, or an existing Program in the District opening at a new school building) may only begin at the start of first semester (after Labor Day) or the start of second semester (after MLK Day). New Programs must provide at least four weeks notice to the District in order to allow for time required for the review and approval process.

Before a Program can be approved, the Program must provide to the Deputy Superintendent a logistical proposal for its implementation of the Program that explains, at a minimum, the Program's location and transportation to that location as well as the grade level and school buildings that would be included in the proposed Program. If the logistical proposal can be implemented in accordance with Board Policy, the District will then work with the Program to finalize an appropriate class schedule for the Program.

Approved Programs must execute a Memorandum of Agreement acknowledging its understanding and acceptance of Program requirements prior to providing students with any released time instruction. The District may cancel the Memorandum of Agreement within its discretion upon written notice to the Program, and vice versa.

#### **Program Requirements for Students**

Consistent with Ohio law and Board Policy, students may only be excused to attend a released time religious instruction program when:

1. The student's parent or guardian gives consent in writing;
2. The sponsoring entity (Program) maintains attendance records and makes them available to the District;
3. The sponsoring entity provides and assumes liability for the student; and
4. The student assumes responsibility for any missed school work.

The District will excuse students to attend a released time program only during times that do not involve core curriculum subjects (recess and lunch) and students will not earn course credit for participation in the released time program. The time period(s) permitted for the Program may change at any time for reasons including, but not limited to, school programming or other student needs.

All participating students must provide to the District a Student Waiver of Liability and Acceptance of Terms and Conditions for Permission to Participate signed by their parent or guardian.

Transportation for students participating in a released time program is entirely the responsibility of the Program, the student, and/or the student's parent or guardian. The District shall not be liable for any injuries arising from such transportation.

**No District Involvement**

No District funds will be expended for, or District personnel involved in, the provision of any religious instruction. No District employees will be involved in promoting or discouraging participation in a released time program. The District's approval of student participation in a Program does not, in any way, constitute an endorsement of religion or infringe upon any individual's rights under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.