

## Testimony Opposing SB 174

Kyle Benzle

1. **My name is Kyle Benzle.** I served in the U.S. Navy from 2004 to 2008, I have been a small farmer, a researcher, an instructor at OSU, and now a part-time court observer. I'm here to oppose Senate Bill 174. This bill does nothing to fix the overburdened family courts. It instead gives a conflicted system even more power to strip parents of their rights and profit from family separation.
2. **Incentives in Ohio's domestic courts** are backwards. Many of our elected judges grow wealthy not from their state salaries but from campaign contributions made by the very law firms they are meant to be impartial to. To the public, just this *appearance of impropriety* is enough to destroy faith in the courts, let alone what it actually means for the children caught up in this system through no fault of their own.
3. **Every election cycle, even with most judges running unopposed,** the largest family-law firms line up to make the maximum contributions to every judge running, regardless of party or beliefs. In the largest family-firms, every four years associates are given bonuses with the clear understanding that a portion will flow back into judicial campaigns as simply "the cost of doing business".
4. **When lawyers from those firms appear before the bench,** everyone here knows exactly what it means when they say with a wink and nod, "Congratulations on the win your honor, hope to see you on the golf course." This income stream they have become dependent on means Judges are accountable to their contributors, not to the families they are elected to serve.
5. **This is why outcomes are so often decided long before trial.** Cases are quietly horse-traded behind closed doors with phrases like, "I'll give you the Benzle case if you let me have the Jones's." By the time a case reaches a judge, on average, over 2 years later and after both parents have been drained financially, there is rarely even a trial. 99% of the time Judges simply sign off on forced settlements.
6. If there is any judicial input, the only real question asked is whether the non-custodial parent is "paying their bills." I've seen parents jailed, not for harming a child or breaking a law, but for falling behind on fees to court-appointed service providers. SB 174 expands judicial discretion, lowers standards, and entrenches this money flow.
7. **Elected domestic court judges** publicly campaign against equal shared parenting, why do they do this? For example, **Judge James Brown**, while actively serving on the bench, came to this very Statehouse to lobby against 50/50 custody, saying that, quote, "[judicial] bias is simply the nature of the beast," [1] end quote. So why not try to reduce bias instead of defending it?

8. **We cannot know their motives**, but we do know that default equal parenting would collapse an industry that judges and their colleagues have profited from for decades at the expense of Ohio's children. And when judges accept massive contributions from some of Ohio's largest law firms, how can any parent believe impartiality still exists? If you can't afford one of these top firms, you and your children don't stand a chance.
9. **Most Ohioans assume 50/50** parenting is already the default, because that's common sense. Yet parents discover too late that the law is stacked against them, spending years and tens of thousands of dollars just to see their children while pitted against each other unnecessarily.
10. **Kentucky** shows what happens when actual reform works. They passed what is essentially the opposite of SB 174, default 50/50 custody. According to the *Associated Press*, time with fathers increased immediately, divorce costs dropped, and one of the state's largest divorce firms shut down because fanning the flames of conflict was no longer profitable. That's why certain judges and firms are fighting to block equal parenting here with SB 174, which protects the status quo.
11. **SB 174 is not reform**, it is protection for a broken system. It expands judicial power, entrenches the graft, and sacrifices Ohio's children for a billion-dollar industry.
12. **Instead of empowering conflicted judges** and wealthy law firms, we should be empowering families. Make equal shared parenting the default, bring transparency to campaign finance, and remove the financial incentives that have turned our courts into profit centers at the expense of Ohio's families.
13. **This isn't about fathers vs. mothers** and I am not here to claim that the judges and family law attorneys that wrote and sponsored this bill are sexist or biased, it's simpler than that, they're evil. Family court is broken, and the most powerful law firms in this state are profiting from family separation and lying to your faces with this legislative power grab.

Thank you for your time.

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOLgXGqDMsc>