**Kelly Haight**

**House Bill 428**

**Senate Education Committee**

**November 4th, 2018**

Chair Lehner, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Minority Member Sykes, and members of the Ohio Senate Education Committee. My name is Kelly Haight and I am a **proponent** of House Bill 428. It is in my deepest regret that I am out of state and could not be here today.

I am a 2015 graduate of a large, central Ohio public high school. I would like to share with you the obstacles that I faced during my senior year that may have been avoided if something like the Ohio Student Religious Liberties Act of 2018 had been in place.

My senior year, I led a group called Faith. The purpose of this group was to allow teenagers to share their passion of their religion, and to grow together in their faith. We met every Thursday before school, and every Sunday off campus for a student-led Bible study. During the year, we asked to be treated equal to all other student led groups at school. We were not in the school’s yearbook, announcements, or club list.

When the faith group tried to become an official club of the school, we were denied the status due to the religious nature of the group. It was then that I was told by school officials that Faith was being treated differently because of its religious nature. I personally felt that I was manipulated and intimidated into silence by the school. As a result, I was forced to retain legal counsel to interact with the school. This led to several meetings with the building principal and district officials, and extended discussions of the Federal Equal Access Act.

As senior graduation approached, we asked to use the school’s auditorium for a Baccalaureate. Secular clubs were permitted to use the facility. However, because of the religious nature of the event, it was unclear to the school if this would be permitted, although it was completely student led and not sponsored by the school. Again, our counsel was forced to work with the school officials to address the Federal Equal Access Act issues.

I am pleased to inform you that the school ultimately allowed us to use the auditorium for Baccalaureate with the help from our legal counsel. I am also pleased to inform you that in the current school year, the school has allowed Faith to be in the yearbook, have announcements and be registered on the club list, but this was only made possible due to the assistance of the legal counsel during my school year.

In my case, after a significant commitment of my time and effort, it appears that the school is moving in the right direction. However, we were forced to retain counsel and endure months of uncertainty. Counsel was forced to interact with the school. Not all public-school students will have that same opportunity to retain counsel and may be intimidated about raising these issues with school officials.

For most of my senior year, Faith was in an uncertain status and it did not appear as a student group in the yearbook, while other secular groups did. House Bill 428 will clarify appropriate treatment of student led religious groups. This will make future situations easier for administrators and students within public schools.

I respectfully ask that you support this House Bill. It will allow a very grey area within school districts to become clear and defined. It will also make sure that future students will not have to retain counsel and endure a year long struggle to gain equal access and treatment. Thank you.