

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 445. My name is Jan Scheeler and I am from Licking County.

I recently retired from Johnstown Monroe Local School District as Attendance Secretary to Johnstown Elementary School. Over the years that I worked there I saw many reasons for students missing school, some valid with our district policy and some not. Among the reasons were students missing school for religious holidays and events. These were excused absences, but counted toward the student's absentee hours. I was not aware that the district had a policy that allowed students to miss school for religious reasons, a policy that was, in fact, 70 years old. Unfortunately, this policy was rescinded unanimously in the fall of 2023 by the school board after parents in the school district asked that LifeWise Academy, a religious instruction program that has its origin in Ohio, could be presented to district students with parental permission as a released time program during the school day. Parents and LifeWise Academy were asking for lunch/recess time at the elementary level, one time a week, amounting to approximately ½ hour per week of school hours missed (lunch time is not included in school hours). After rescinding the district policy, the only board member to explain why this policy was removed was that recess was a very important part of the day and should not be taken away from any student.

Parents know what is best for their children and should get to decide whether to include religious instruction in their student's schedule. Many parents in our district do support a religious program to impact their student in a positive way including behavior, attendance, academics and mental health. The school board's action denied our parents access to LifeWise as a released time program. This should not happen in Ohio or any other part of the United States where religious freedom should be respected without prejudice or denied as a basic right in our Constitution. Many parents are unable to homeschool or send their student to a religious private school.

I ask that, in light of the developments at Johnstown Monroe Local School District and other districts in Ohio who have taken similar action to deny access to released time for religious education, you would change one word in House Bill 445 from "may" to "shall", so that all districts will adopt a released time policy that allows parents, not the school district, the ultimate choice of whether to provide religious instruction for their children during the school day.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to advocate for House Bill 445.

Sincerely,

Jan Scheeler