

Lawmakers want districts to allow LifeWise students to bring materials back to school

By Cole Behrens
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The Ohio Senate wants to amend the state's religious release bill to prevent public school districts from prohibiting religious groups like LifeWise from providing students with candy, trinkets, or other materials, or limiting the number of times a student can attend a program.

The amendments to the state budget bill proposed in the Ohio Senate Finance Committee would require school districts to permit students to bring external educational and program materials into school. A number of school districts, including some in central Ohio, have passed policies preventing groups like LifeWise from providing materials, candy or trinkets to students.

The proposal also requires school districts to permit students to attend a released time course in religious instruction for at least 33 periods per school year.

Religious release time allows students to leave during the day for religious instruction, typically during an elective or lunch. [LifeWise, a Hilliard-based Christian organization](#) that teaches students the Bible, is one of the [largest users of religious release time in the state](#) and country.

A [common criticism from opponents of organizations like LifeWise](#) is that they give candy or other incentives to schoolchildren to encourage them to attend off-campus religious education and to tell other students about the incentives so they will attend as well.

In 2024, the Republican-controlled Ohio General Assembly passed a law during the lame duck session, and signed by Gov. Mike DeWine, that required districts to adopt a policy allowing religious release instruction. The law went into effect on April 9.

Several central Ohio school districts, including Columbus, Upper Arlington and Worthington, have adopted model policies that limit items being returned to school.

The state Senate version of the changes differs from an Ohio House version of the budget, which would require school districts to permit students to attend a released time course in religious instruction for at least one period per week and no more than two times a week.

LifeWise attorney had warned that districts' model policy opened them to lawsuits

In April, the Texas-based First Liberty Institute, a conservative religious liberty nonprofit representing LifeWise, warned districts that the policy group North East Ohio Learning Associates (NEOLA) has been providing model policies to school districts aimed at making it more difficult for LifeWise to operate.

The NEOLA model policy includes an option that prohibits religious release providers from giving students "materials, snacks, clothing, candies, trinkets, or other items for their return to school."

Jeremy Dys, senior legal counsel for the First Liberty Institute, told The Dispatch in April that the NEOLA policy was "so many layers of bureaucracy that it will discourage anybody from participation," in what he said was a violation of the First Amendment.

"It almost reads as if NEOLA is trying to work with others that don't want to see release time education occurring," Dys said. "So they're creating a lot of bureaucratic traps along the way that would make it really, really, really hard. 'Oh, sure, you can do release time education, but you've got to jump through 895 fiery hoops in order to do that.'"

Dys also pointed to an [April 10 letter from Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost](#), in which he warns school districts that the NEOLA policy provision was overly broad and "taken literally, a policy with broad language like that would prohibit sharing literature like memory cards, devotional lesson books, or even Bibles."

Religious release was a local flash point in 2024

Religious release time in public schools became a flash point among central Ohio school districts in 2024, with [Westerville and](#)

Worthington City school boards both voting to rescind their policies allowing religious release.

The Westerville school board vote to rescind releasing students came at a meeting Sept. 30, 2024, after more than two hours of public comments from speakers and followed multiple meetings of packed crowds and public testimony. Throughout the discussions, LifeWise supporters wore red, while many in opposition wore black.

In December, Worthington City Schools voted to rescind their religious release policy after several widely attended meetings where the public similarly wore red and black.

Both Westerville and Worthington have readopted religious release policies to comply with state law. Worthington's contains the provision preventing materials being sent back to school, while Westerville's does not.