

## Opponents of Revere's off-campus religious initiative mobilize

by Sheldon Ocker

A serious backlash has begun over the Revere school board's decision to allow students to leave class to take religious instruction.

On April 16, the board of education unanimously approved a policy that enables students in grades 1-12 to miss school (but not a core curriculum course) and travel off campus for religious training, as long as they have parental consent and no school personnel, facilities or modes of transportation are used.

Persuading the board to take this action was an organization called LifeWise Academy, based in Hilliard, Ohio, near Columbus. LifeWise has taken advantage of a 2014 law passed by the state legislature to permit such religious activity within a public school context.

LifeWise Academy has drawn criticism in other school districts, and now the organization has raised the ire of hundreds (maybe thousands) of Revere residents. A seven-member group called Residents of Revere Local School District against LifeWise Academy says they have gathered 816 signatures on a petition whose purpose is to persuade the school board to rescind its decision.

LifeWise has been targeted because presumably students would have nowhere else to procure religious training during a school

day and because of LifeWise's teachings.

"The curriculum that's being taught — there are some scary values being taught to students," said Emily Jimerson, a Bath resident who, along with three other women, decided to circulate a petition in the school district.

Jimerson and her group also are wary of children as young as 6 being proselytized by LifeWise.

"I think there's a great concern about recruitment," she said. "The participants are encouraged to return to school with prizes to recruit other students. Teachers are encouraged to hand out information about LifeWise, and this is from the LifeWise website.

"LifeWise volunteers are encouraged to come in and have little parties for the teachers and reward them with doughnuts and lattes and other things."

Travis Singer, who has two children in Revere schools, has other objections.

"I feel this changes the culture of Revere," he said. "What you're doing by allowing this to happen — by sanctioning an organization like LifeWise or any other religious organization — you're creating an us versus them situation, and you're further dividing the district, like in the school building."

Singer also worries about the cultural tenets being taught by a conservative religious entity.

"You are basically putting kids on a bus to send them to a place to learn that other children's families in the district aren't as equal or as valid as theirs," Singer said, "whether it is LGBTQ families or cohabiting couples who have no children, or divorced people, anything like that."

The bottom line for Singer, "I don't understand how this furthers the mission of the Revere school district to educate the students with the curriculum they've been employed to educate them with."

What about residents who signed an online petition provided by LifeWise to support the organization?

Superintendent Michael Tefs said that he was informed that about 150 residents signed the "community interest list" on the LifeWise website.

"We have that petition because I requested it," Singer said. "It's about 97 signatures. It was not over 100, I can assure you of that."

There is no contractual arrangement between Revere and LifeWise, but according to Singer there has been discussions between LifeWise and the district concerning logistical details that indicate LifeWise will be the dominant — and probably the only — provider of religious instruction for Revere kids.

"LifeWise is significantly pushing the superintendents, and that's plural," Singer said. "First, they've tried with Dr. Tefs, and now they're trying with Mr. White. They are pushing for an email that says, 'Yes, we agree to allow you to come in and do this.'"

Tefs resigned in January but is serving out the rest of his term, which ends July 31. Dan White is the incoming superintendent and currently an adviser until Aug. 1, when his contract begins.

Singer made a public records request from the board for every email pertinent to the new policy. According to him, he received about 900; however, all but about 300 are original emails copied to others.

"Not one of the emails involved discussion among board members," he said. "But Dr. Tefs has had interactions with LifeWise folks as well as with some of the people who signed the petition on LifeWise's behalf."

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## LifeWise continued

Singer said that as far back as Feb. 20, 2023, Tefs received an email from LifeWise that said district residents were interested in supporting LifeWise.

One "email" was a voice message from

Tefs to a LifeWise supporter, which said, in part, "Hi, Taryn, Michael Tefs here. Yes, yes, I'm sure youth are applauding. We got the board to approve the policy."

In the rest of the message, Tefs explained to Taryn that because he would not be

employed by Revere during the 2024-25 school year, he was leaving further decisions to White.

Said Singer, "When there is a policy like this, perhaps they [the board] should be proactive and ask for feedback from the community before they enact it." ∞

## Policy dispute triggers residents' challenge to Revere board

by Sheldon Ocker  
May 21 school board meeting

At least 75 community members – about 73 more than usual – crowded into the high school media center to express their alarm with the Revere board of education's decision in April to allow students to leave class to take religious instruction.

The public is permitted to address the board at the end of its regular meetings, so these folks waited. In addition to criticizing the policy approved by the board last month, the visitors were disappointed and angry that the board seems to be courting an evangelical religious group called LifeWise Academy, which presumably would be the students' only provider of religious information inasmuch as traditional churches do not conduct such training during school hours.

Before any of the dissenters spoke, board President Keith Malick gave the board's side of things.

"The board is concerned with questions of policy," Malick said, contrasting that with the administration's job of implementing the details of policies.

"Individuals with questions or complaints should contact the appropriate administrator," he said, seemingly absolving the board of any decisions involving LifeWise.

He also said that to date, the board has

not been presented with a proposal to make any sort of agreement with LifeWise.

Malick pointed to an email from a Revere parent sent to Tefs more than a year ago saying a group of district parents were interested in release time for religious training.

"Then last December a group called LifeWise asked us to distribute a flyer," he said.

"Dr. Tefs denied that request."

Malick said Tefs told the board about that request and denial. To participate, said Tefs, the board would have to create a policy. Malick also said an individual contacted Tefs, saying a group of parents were on the local LifeWise steering committee.

The board had not indicated the policy needed tweaking or further examination, but during the meeting Malick said, "I can assure you that this board still has questions on how the district administration will implement the policy."

He also indicated that residents had plenty of opportunity to offer input, pointing out that the policy was first discussed on March 12, again on March 19 and on April 9 before the April 16 vote.

Malick did not address most of the issues raised by community members.

Former teacher and school administrator Jane Bechtel, whose children went to Revere schools, pointed out the disrupt-

tion to classrooms and teachers caused by students coming and going during the day. One of the state requirements of the religious release policy is that kids must make up any work missed.

"Sure, they're going to make up the work, but we all know kids have all types of different learning skills, all types of learning speeds, all types of abilities," she said. "And so you're trying to adjust your teaching for all the kids in your room, who's leaving, who's staying."

A few speakers – there were eight – worried about the values LifeWise teaches. Examples were found on its website condemning the LGBTQ community and unmarried couples who cohabit "living in sin."

Malick said 15 nearby school districts have adopted a religious release policy like Revere's. Dr. Jeffrey Archinal disputed this characterization.

"Hudson's principal says when the kids can leave," he said. "Revere's policy as written says anybody who takes attendance [a requirement of the provider] and has liability insurance and a bus can pull up in front and take the kids away."

"Copley's policy says that specific organizations are forbidden to evangelize at the school. ... I practice in Wadsworth. They have a line in their policy that makes it clear that the staff is not allowed to encourage or discourage people from going."

A group of residents opposed to the policy said it has a petition with 819 signatures of district residents. LifeWise presented a petition to Tefs with purportedly 150 names, though Travis Springer, a resident who counted, said there are about 97 names.

"The engagement that you're seeing here, I don't believe it is going to disappear," Singer said. "We're not going to get bored with this issue and with LifeWise or any other religious group. ... If the district decides to go forward with this, we will not just sit back and say 'better luck next time.'"

No community member spoke to defend the policy. ∞



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