



**Testimony on House Bill 59 - Biennial Operating Budget
April 17, 2013**

Ohio Senate Finance Committee
Senator Scott Oelslager, Chair

Dr. Richard A. Ross, Superintendent of Public Instruction
Ohio Department of Education

Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chair Coley, Ranking Member Sawyer and members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about potential House changes to House Bill 59, the biennial operating budget, as it relates to Ohio's system of K-12 education.

Introduction

I am Richard A. Ross, Superintendent of Public Instruction, and head of the Ohio Department of Education (ODE). I started my time at ODE a little over three weeks ago after serving for 14 months as Governor Kasich's Director of 21st Century Education. I am a life-long educator with over 35 years of experience as a teacher, principal and district superintendent. I am humbled and honored that the State Board of Education has given me this opportunity to continue to advance Ohio's education system. I am committed to providing the guidance and support at the state level so that Ohio has a world class education system. This will only occur if our schools are able to be flexible and responsive to a rapidly changing global society that is increasingly interconnected.

In order for our boys and girls to realize the academic success they need to connect to the jobs available to them, we must be honest with ourselves and truly keep our children at the center of everything we do. We must rethink how we teach, what we teach, and how we measure results. We must pursue innovation that yields results.

Before I begin outlining the work that this budget will support, I should point out that the House Finance Committee approved a substitute version of House Bill 59 last week and then approved additional amendments yesterday before passing it out of Committee. This testimony was written prior to the amendments made yesterday and, therefore, some of the comments included in my remarks may not accurately reflect the House's latest version of House Bill 59.

Early Childhood Education and Literacy

Education begins well before a child enters kindergarten. Many of our youngsters are not exposed to experiences that help prepare them to learn. Our high-needs children in particular begin kindergarten without the skills they need to successfully engage in learning and find themselves far behind their peers. We must intervene early if we expect children to read at grade level by the end of third grade and to go on to graduate from high school.

One major initiative that is advancing our efforts in this area is the work being completed through Ohio's federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant. This four-year \$70 million grant was a collaborative effort between ODE, the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, the Governor's Office, the Ohio Business Roundtable, Battelle for Kids and many other partners. Through this grant we are working to update our early childhood standards, to develop a more comprehensive evaluation of kindergarten readiness, and to implement the Step Up to Quality rating system that will inform parents about the quality of early childhood providers available to them. This information will also inform the state's investment so that increased funding is targeted to publicly funded preschool programs that are highly rated.

Reading is the gateway to success and without it our children will not realize their full potential. In 2012, after 10 years of a reading guarantee in Ohio law, over 27,000 students were not reading at grade level in third grade. This is not acceptable. Our schools and districts must make sure that a child's ability to read is their number one priority. This is why I am so passionate about the changes made in Senate Bill 316 with regard to the third grade reading guarantee. Through this legislation, diagnostics will be administered in kindergarten through third grade that will show us which children are not reading at grade level. These children will then be provided targeted interventions and supports by qualified teachers. No more will children go on to fourth grade struggling to grasp the content and skills they need to succeed in life.

Teaching Profession

Ohio has made significant strides to ensure that our children have quality teachers, which is essential to the success of students. In 2009, Ohio moved to a four-tiered licensure system which consists of a 4-year residency program, the first state program of its kind. Mentorship for young teachers is key to retaining quality teachers in the profession. Beginning this fall resident educators will be required to take a new performance-based assessment to gain their professional license. The increased rigor of this assessment goes hand in hand with the recent changes made along the full teacher continuum from teacher preparation programs to evaluation systems.

ODE has worked collaboratively with the Board of Regents to develop a new system of rating our teacher preparation programs and to discuss strategies to get our brightest college students to pursue teacher licenses in high-need grades and subjects. Often our new teachers find themselves in licensure areas that are saturated and not able to find employment when they graduate. We cannot lose these talented teachers to other states or have them leave the teaching profession altogether.

Finally, ODE has been working with the State Board of Education as well as schools and districts across the state to implement the new teacher and principal evaluation systems established in House Bill 153. Basing a teacher's performance on the academic growth of their students is just common sense. Historically our evaluation system has yielded positive ratings for over 99% of our teachers. While I know we have wonderful teachers here in Ohio, we have to be honest with ourselves in order to improve. Some believe the motive of these new evaluation systems is to fire educators – which is not the case. It is to accurately show educators their strengths and weaknesses so that they can improve instruction in the classroom.

In order for the evaluation system to achieve this objective, it must be implemented with fidelity across the state. We must have credentialed evaluators that consistently rate teachers and principals from school to school. Much of this work has been done with federal Race to the Top funding up to this point, but as this funding goes away over the next biennium, some additional General Revenue Funds will be needed. The first substitute version of House Bill 59 that the House Finance Committee approved last week reduced funds for this purpose. I strongly urge that funding levels in this area be restored to those proposed in the As-Introduced version of the bill.

Student Supports and Options

Last summer for the first time, the U.S. Department of Education published four-year graduation rates measured consistently across all 50 states. Ohio's graduation rate was 80% with 22 states ahead of us. While I am not satisfied with being in the middle of the pack, I was shocked when I looked at the graduation rates of our special needs populations. The average graduation rate of our poorest students was 65%; African American students - 59%; and limited English proficient students - 53%. We absolutely must close these achievement gaps.

Closing these gaps is one of the primary focuses of Ohio's flexibility waiver request, which ODE is in the process of updating to incorporate the new accountability system established in House Bill 555. The new A-F Local Report Card will include a measure to determine whether our

schools and districts are closing these gaps. This measure, along with others, will transparently report to our schools, communities and education stakeholders where we must improve.

One way to ensure that the needs of every student are met is to provide quality choices. Ohio has advanced greatly in this area over the past 10 years through many additional options - including community schools, STEM schools, career-technical education, scholarship programs, and soon college preparatory boarding schools. Parents and students deserve to have other options if their home district is not meeting their needs. This is why I am excited that the House has supported the expansion of the EdChoice Scholarship Program as proposed by the Governor. Expansion is proposed in two areas - first, if a school is failing to make sufficient progress in kindergarten through third grade literacy; and second, if a student is economically disadvantaged. The opportunity for economically disadvantaged students to obtain a scholarship is funded through a separate line item in ODE's budget, rather than through a deduction from the student's resident district, and would only fund kindergarten students in the first year and first graders in the second year.

Accountability and Intervention

I already briefly mentioned Ohio's new A-F Local Report Card but I want to take a moment to provide a little more detail. The report card ratings just released for the 2011-12 school year resulted in 60% of our districts being excellent or excellent with distinction. Again, we are not being honest with ourselves. I do not blame our schools and educational professionals for succeeding in the system established by the state. I believe that in the same way they adjusted to the old system they will rise to the challenge and succeed in this new more rigorous system – and they will not falter when, initially, the results are likely low.

I am also excited that the measures and components within the new Local Report Card directly align with the state's goals and priorities. The following six components are all areas I have already discussed as keys to Ohio realizing a world class education system:

1. Achievement,
2. Progress,
3. Graduation,
4. K-3 Literacy Progress,
5. Gap Closing, and
6. Prepared for Success

Achievement Everywhere Education Reforms

I believe that the formula proposed by the Governor is the right structure and I look forward to working with both the House and the Senate to finalize a plan that both sufficiently allocates resources and is sustainable into the future.

The House also reduced the Straight A fund by 50% in both years. I believe this is the most important investment in our budget. This funding will drive the changes necessary in classrooms so that all our boys and girls can achieve. For this reason I strongly recommend you restore the funding levels proposed by the Governor. We must stop doing what we have always done and strive for effective and efficient instructional practices that are sustainable into the future. I would also recommend that the award amounts not be capped by \$500,000 for individual schools or districts and by \$1.0 million for consortia. These amounts might be enough for smaller districts and schools but may not be sufficient for our larger ones. I also recommend an odd number of members be appointed to the governing board so that tie votes can be avoided.

The House also proposed to base the funding formula for traditional districts on a monthly count. I support counts being taken more often but the methodology proposed by the House would be both costly and inefficient for school districts. For example, average daily membership counts that currently occur only in October take three months to finalize as districts must account for every student who lives in their district regardless of where they are educated. Also, keep in mind that the proposed count would have to be taken every month and there are some months that our schools are not in session.

Again, I am not opposed to counts being taken more often. In fact, I believe that holding districts accountable for attendance throughout the year will provide the right incentive for proper accounting of student attendance. However, we must propose a methodology that can be implemented and not be over-burdensome to districts. Also, I would recommend that if a new count methodology is established that it be implemented in the second year of the biennium to allow ODE the time to communicate the changes and appropriately implement the new counting method.

Conclusion

House Bill 59 builds upon the many education reforms already being implemented by Ohio. I look forward to working with you, the House, the State Board of Education, our educational professionals across the state and other interested stakeholders to make sure that when others

in this country or around world want to study a world class education system - they look to Ohio.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today; at this time I am happy to entertain any questions you may have.