



Testimony on the Ohio State School for the Blind Budget Provisions of House Bill 64, the FY16-17 Biennial Budget

Ohio Senate
Finance Subcommittee on Education
Senator Cliff Hite, Chair
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Denyse Woods, Interim Superintendent
Ohio State School for the Blind

Chairman Hite, Vice Chair Sawyer and members of the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Education, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the Ohio State School for the Blind budget provision sections of House Bill 64, the Fiscal Year 2016-2017 Biennial Budget. I am Denyse Woods, interim superintendent at the Ohio State School for the Blind.

The Ohio State School for the Blind has been serving students with visual impairments and other disabilities for 178 years. We currently serve 101 students at our Clintonville campus and work to provide outreach services to approximately 2,200 students statewide. Our mission is to work cooperatively with students, families and the community to provide an effective, enjoyable educational experience through specialized curriculum, equipment, materials and individualized disability-specific instruction to develop our students' unique potential. The governor's budget recommends GRF appropriation for the Ohio State School for the Blind of \$8.2 million in FY16 and \$8.5 million in FY17. This represents growth of \$964,000, or 13.2 percent, in FY16 and another \$246,000, or 3.0 percent in FY17.

For a child with blindness or visual impairment, an appropriate education includes all general education course content like reading, math and science, but it also includes what is commonly called the "expanded core curriculum," such as independent living skills, social interaction skills, recreation and leisure skills, career education, orientation and mobility, and communication skills like Braille and assistive technology. These skill areas are especially important to students with disabilities beyond blindness. While the general education and expanded core curriculum can be delivered in both traditional school and specialized school settings, some students require a level of intensity in these areas that is only available in a specialized school such as the Ohio State School for the Blind. Every student receives instruction and guidance from highly qualified staff that have been specially trained to work with children and young adults who are blind and visually impaired. The majority of the recommended increase in GRF appropriations is to ensure that current staff is fully funded and recommended staffing levels are maintained.

Students at the school participate in academic programming in elementary, middle and high school that align with Ohio's academic content standards. Every student has an individualized education program that ensures that the education provided to our students is focused on their individual needs and abilities. Nearly half of our students have multiple disabilities that require specialized services and extensive resources, such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychological services or adaptive technology. Our students are exposed to music and adaptive physical education activities as part of their experience at the school, and we hold the proud distinction of being the first blind high school marching band to perform in the New Year's Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, California.

The residential component of our program supports the work of the educational program and assists students in acquiring social-emotional and independent living skills. Staff designated as youth leaders provide structured activities for all residential students during non-class hours, Monday through Thursday, with students usually returning home for weekends and holidays. Our residential students sometimes participate in summer programs to extend their learning opportunities beyond the traditional school year. For many years, these programs were partially funded with a variety of grants; however, over the past two years, these programs have been funded entirely with GRF funds. In order to maintain the programs for students identified as needing extended school year services, additional GRF funding is recommended in each fiscal year.

Our school is a home away from home for many of our students who live outside daily commuting distance. Our residential facility was part of an overall \$40 million facility upgrade project to both our school and the Ohio School for the Deaf. Renovation allowed for expanded residential space and 12 new dormitories to be built on campus. These new facilities are state of the art and provide the opportunity for our students to be both comfortable and safe while in residence on our campus. Additional funding is recommended for the increased costs associated with the operation of these facilities, including maintenance, food service and utilities. The safety and security of our students is a top priority. This is why we need to have 24-hour security to act as a first line of defense for any threat to the health, safety and welfare of our students. Additional funding is recommended to enhance contracted security services.

Outside of our school, students who are blind and visually impaired are often served in locations where specialized programs and services do not exist or are limited. Many public school systems do not have staff with training and expertise to work with learners who are blind, visually impaired or have multiple disabilities. Many have no experience with learners whose learning modality is hands-on and auditory rather than visual. It is the mission of the comprehensive outreach program and services at the Ohio State School for the Blind to support local districts serving the approximately 2,200 blind and visually impaired students in the state. The outreach department provides technical assistance, professional development, parent mentoring, infant/preschool assessments and consultations, school-age assessments and consultations, multi-factored evaluations and much more. As part of our outreach services, we also collaborate with the Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities to support employment needs for individuals with disabilities.

The Ohio State School for the Blind is an important educational option for students who are visually impaired throughout the state. We work to help our students gain the knowledge and life skills necessary to live independent and productive lives. We welcome this challenge and are inspired daily by the students and families we serve. We also have achieved these goals at funding levels that have remained the same over the past six years. The recommended increases included in the governor's budget will allow the school to continue to provide a high-quality education to Ohio's visually impaired students and ensure their safety and security.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. We are proud of the work we do and the students we serve. If you would ever like to visit our facility, please feel free to contact me. I promise you will be impressed. I would now be happy to answer any questions you have.