

Chairwoman Lehner, Vice Chairman Huffman, Ranking Minority Member Sykes, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to voice my concern about Senate Bill 216. I am a parent of a gifted child in the Worthington School District.

As a parent, it is incredibly concerning to see the changes that Senate Bill 216 would make to the recently adopted state standards for gifted education. Those standards went into effect in July of 2017, and were a source of hope to parents of Ohio's gifted students, signaling that our children's educational needs were being taken seriously. Specifically, the new standards indicated the state's acknowledgement that gifted students deserve instruction by teachers qualified in gifted education. A mere 5 months later, those requirements are under threat of being removed by SB216.

It is important to note that in the state of Ohio, gifted students are not guaranteed services. We have students across the state identified as gifted learners, who do not receive specialized services. They may receive differentiation within their classroom, they may be peer grouped with other gifted students in reading or math, but they do not receive what can be called "gifted services". What Senate Bill 216 proposes is that districts be allowed to provide something they can call gifted services, without investing in the proper education or training for staff which would actually make it a true service to gifted students.

Giftedness does not simply mean that these students learn differently than their peers. It means they are inherently wired differently than their peers in multiple areas - academic, social, emotional, and in many cases physical. Gifted students experience social and emotional challenges which require specified training to understand in the context of a classroom setting. They often require teaching methods which are counter-intuitive to a traditional classroom environment. We would not allow a teacher to instruct a classroom of special education students without proper training and professional development in the unique needs and challenges of special education students, and call that a service to those children. It is not a service, if the person providing it does not have training in the specific student population being served. It is differentiation, yes. It is peer grouping, yes. But it is not a service and it is misleading to allow districts to treat it as such.

Gifted students face unique educational challenges. The social and emotional differences from their peers are well documented and researched, and impact their education in much the same way as special education students. It is imperative that teaching staff providing a service to gifted students are educated in Dabrowski's Overexciteabilities, that they understand both the definition and educational impact of the term "asynchronous development", and that they receive training on serving twice exceptional students. Parents of gifted students have become self-taught experts on all of these things, because in far too many circumstances, we are the only ones in a room full of educators who have any idea what these concepts are or how they are impacting our child's education. It is right, and appropriate, and valid to request that the state honor the new requirements that teachers providing a "gifted service" be educated in these fundamental principles of gifted education. Yes, teachers already meet other professional development requirements. But we are speaking about a specific sub-group of students, and we are describing providing them with a specific "service". It is disingenuous to provide that service without requiring teachers to have a solid understanding of the subset of students.

I have spoken to you as a parent, but I am also a former teacher - I taught preschool in Worthington for 7 years, was a substitute in districts around central Ohio at all grade levels and subject areas, and taught middle school for 5 years at Calumet Christian School in Columbus. Speaking as a teacher I must strongly disagree with the assertion that standard professional development and training are sufficient to prepare educators to offer gifted services. I must also disagree that this is an issue of placing trust in classroom teachers to know what their students need. It is possible to trust teachers to lead their classrooms but also know that specific knowledge on teaching a very specific type of student must be explicitly learned.

In all of my years of undergraduate teaching experiences, in classes in pursuit of my masters degree in education, and in years of professional development and on the job training, I gained an incredible wealth of knowledge that served me well in my classrooms. I knew my students' academic needs better than the administrators, better than their parents in most cases. However, I was not qualified to offer services to special education students, because not once in all my years of education for a general classroom did I receive a specific education on how to provide true services to those students. I knew how to understand an IEP, I knew how to tailor my lessons to differentiate to a spectrum of abilities, and I also knew that I was not providing special ed services because I was not a licensed special ed teacher. I was not a trained reading specialist. I was not a trained speech teacher or ESL teacher. And no matter how many students I had in my classes who I helped with their reading, or their language skills, I was not providing those students academic services in those areas.

Likewise, in all of my education as a teacher, I never once heard the words asynchronous development. I never took a class that demonstrated the importance of speech-to-text technology for kids whose cognitive abilities far exceed their gross motor skills. I never had a single professor mention to me how best to meet the needs of an elementary student who is two grade levels above their peers academically but still struggling with basic self-care issues because their social and emotional maturity is two grade levels behind their peers. I was not qualified, by way of the regular course of teacher training, to provide gifted services to students.

When my own gifted child was in need of additional supports at school, I learned what he needed not from his classroom teachers, who are wonderful, but who were struggling, as I was, to figure out how to help him, or from his principal, who is the most invested principal I've known, or from his school psychologist, who after months of evaluations was unsure what would help - I learned these concepts, and the tools and teaching methods that work for my son, from people trained in gifted education. Professional development in gifted education is not an issue of receiving training on differentiated lesson plans, and to be perfectly honest, anyone who is conflating the two does not have a grasp of what giftedness is, or what gifted students need by way of "services". It is imperative that we understand gifted students as more than just kids who are smart. Giftedness is far more complex than that, and providing services to these students is far more complicated.

I appreciate the committee's time, and hope that you will give deep thought as to why parents of gifted students are speaking up to protect the current standards, and why those of us who are engaged in gifted education feel so strongly that specialized professional development hours are necessary.