

House of Representatives Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education  
Conference Committee on H.B. 9  
Amended Substitute House Bill 9 Testimony  
Licking Heights Local School District  
Feb. 19, 2020

Chairman Jones, Representative Edwards, Representative Robinson, and members of the Subcommittee for Primary and Secondary Education. My name is Philip Wagner. I am the Superintendent of the Licking Heights Local School District and with me is the Licking Heights Treasurer, Mr. Todd Griffith. We are here today to provide testimony regarding House Bill 9, as it is currently amended.

To provide greater context for our school district, we are extremely fast growing with a current enrollment of nearly 4,800 students. This is my ninth year as superintendent and during this time student enrollment has grown from 3,300 students to 4,800. Our fast growth, combined with the state funding gain cap and expansion of private school vouchers, adversely impacts our student classroom experience. As an example, many of our kindergarten classrooms are at 28 students per class. As our district grows so quickly, it is becoming more diverse in many ways, including:

- 40.01% of our students are on the free and reduced lunch program.
- 12.3% of our students are ELL and more than 30 languages are spoken in the school district
- 51% White, 27% Black, 10% Asian, 4% Hispanic, 8% Multiracial
- Licking Heights' State Share Index was 56% for FY19
- Enrollment has grown by 330% over the last 20 years.

In recent years, Licking Heights has been strangled by the state funding gain cap. We have tried to help the school district function with less reliance on state aid. In many respects, changes to the employee insurance plans and the stimulation of community economic development have helped, but such efforts are not large enough to surmount the impact of the gain cap with such a fast-growing school district.

Due to the state funding gain cap, we have lost over \$62 million over the last seven years. In fact, this year alone the gain cap cost our students and community more than \$12 million. Licking Heights receives less than 50% of what the state funding formula calculates, which continues to hurt our long-term financial strategy. We have the highest property tax rates in Licking County and much of that is due to the fact that we are building our fourth new school building in 17 years, which amounts to more than \$100 million in debt we still have to service.

We are one of the fastest growing districts in the State of Ohio and will continue to grow rapidly. In fact, current projections for 2029 conservatively show our school district growing to more than 6,000 students. It is hard to fathom such rapid growth as we approach astronomical deficits, with no relief in state funding. Because of the gain cap and potential expansion of the voucher program, we will need to make deep cuts to our budget and continue to increase student to teacher classroom ratios. No local money should leave our district, where our community works tirelessly to support our students through a multitude of ballot issues. We estimate \$600 thousand will be lost annually due to voucher expansion for our district. What may be the worst part about this expansion, is that it will likely be so costly statewide that the legislature will have no path to fix school funding issues in the next budget. This proposed expansion of EdChoice has far-reaching implications.

It is our position that state money designated for public education should not be transferred or allocated to private schools who operate with little oversight and employ a selective admissions process. We educate each and every child, regardless of ability, while complying with all state and federal mandates.

This concludes our testimony and we would be happy to address your questions. Thank you for your time and attention.

Philip H. Wagner, Ph.D.  
Superintendent

Todd Griffith  
Treasurer