

Thank you Chairmen Oelslager, Vice Chair Scherer, Ranking Member Cera and members of the House Finance Committee. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify today in favor of H. B. 305. My name is Ryan Pendleton, CFO/Treasurer for Akron Public Schools. I would like to continue our testimony by diving into the categoricals or add-on specifics of H.B. 305. Specifically, I will cover special education, English language learners, gifted and transportation.

Our 610 districts are unique and so are the 1.7 million students we serve. We need to align the financial resources to the student needs. We believe this approach and these recommendations do exactly that. H.B. 305 is a rational, understandable and transparent pathway to fund Ohio schools. This is evident not just with the base cost and distribution piece of our plan but consistent throughout. It drove our work in every sub-committee. The plan respects local control and sticks to our critical value that all students can achieve their greatest potential, regardless of their economic circumstances.

Our special education students account for approximately 14-15% of the students we serve. Our current funding model is a per pupil dollar amount for six categories of disabilities. These categories range from speech only (category 1) @ \$1,578, to deaf-blind, autism, and traumatic brain injury (category 6) @ \$25,637. Prior to 2014 these six categories were funded based on a multiplier of the base cost instead of a stand-alone dollar amount which exists today. Since that time, we have seen changes in funding for our special education students which has not been consistent with our base aide amount. For example, during the 2016-17 biennium special education increases were at 2% while the base cost increased by 1.7%. And, conversely, the most recent biennium showed an increase in the base cost while the special education funding remained flat. To remove possible parity issues and to be fair, we recommend returning to a multiplier of the base for the six categories of special education students.

H.B. 305 includes the funding and authorization of a special education cost study by the Ohio Department of Education to take into consideration changes in technology, remedial best practices and other advances to determine the accuracy of the funding levels for the six categories. The last complete study was done in 2001 with updates in 2006 and 2014 which were sponsored by the Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities.

The final recommendation for special education is full funding. Currently, this funding level is at 90% and has been since FY 2004. We recommend the additional ten percent (10%) be set-a-side for catastrophic costs. Currently, if the cost for a student in category 2-5 (speech only is not eligible) exceeds a threshold amount of \$27,375 or if a category six student (i.e. autism) exceeds \$32,850 a district can file to receive additional monies for these more significant student needs. The current amount available state-wide is approximately \$45 million. Claims for last years catastrophic expenses exceeded \$116 million. That's a coverage of less than 40%. The additional 10% being set-a-side would more than double the amount available currently.

Now I would like to discuss English Language Learners and our recommendations.

Before I do a deeper dive into each of these three (3) recommendations, I would like to share some personal stories about English Language Learners (ELL) in my district.

Akron Public Schools is the 5th largest ELL district in Ohio. APS has approximately 1,800 ELL students who speak 43 different languages. There are 63 countries of origin including the U.S. in Akron Public Schools. 50% of our English Learners are refugees.

Some of the challenges that our EL students face daily includes trying to learn English and academic content simultaneously, meeting rigorous graduation requirements, passing state assessments, and understanding how to navigate the school system. Since 50% of our ELL students are also refugees, many have experienced trauma, have educational gaps in their learning, and have experienced hardship that requires additional emotional and educational support.

Aside from these challenges, our ELL students have parents that are limited in English. Our ELL students are required to balance their education at school while also supporting their Limited English Proficient parents at home. At school, Limited English Parents require the support of language interpreters to help them navigate the educational system so that our ELL parents will be able to effectively support their child in U.S. schools. Our staff understands how to support our students and families and are committed to support all students including English Learners to ensure that they are academically successful. As with other districts with similar demographics, we are interested in a funding formula that will provide for the unique needs of these and other students.

Our first recommendation is that a multiplier be returned to the base cost. In fiscal year 2014, the weighted funding for English Language Learners was converted to per pupil amounts. In the most recent biennium, the per pupil weights for English Language Learners remained constant while the per pupil base cost increased. To avoid parity issues, the weighted funding for English Language Learners should be a multiplier of the base cost.

Our second recommendation is that the Ohio Department of Education authorize and fund a cost study. It is our belief that a study will allow English Language Learners Education cost drivers to be accurately identified and quantified allowing the students to receive what they need and allowing treasurers, superintendents, and school boards to more accurately plan.

Finally, recent changes at the federal level under the Every Student Succeeds Act, requires district tracking of ELL students two (2) years after exiting ELL status. We are recommending that Category 3 Funding be adjusted to satisfy this mandate. Specifically, we ask that Category 3 Funding be revised to include ELL students for the two (2) years after they have achieved proficiency. Achieving proficiency means no longer receiving services as an ELL students.

Also, we recommend that Category 2 Funding be revised to include all students enrolled more than 180 days until they achieve proficiency. In my district, we continue service for ELL students beyond the school year and into the summer because they need it. The current funding system ends at the conclusion of the 180 days school year.

Regarding Gifted services, The Ohio Education Research Center conducted a Gifted Cost Study on behalf of the Ohio Department of Education. The goal of the study was twofold: a) develop a deeper understanding of the cost of providing Gifted Education services in a manner that is compliant with the state's Gifted Education operating standards; and b) identify the most appropriate method of funding Gifted Education.

Currently, districts are funded for Gifted identification and also the coordination of Gifted services. The Gifted Cost Study found this to be an underrepresentation of what it actually costs to provide gifted education that meets Ohio's Gifted operating standards. Our current funding methods fails to take into consideration all of the cost drivers for Gifted Education.

Our final recommendation related to Gifted Education is to establish an Incentive Program for rural districts. The Gifted Cost study referenced earlier, noted identification, funding and service inequities. These inequities negatively impacting students who would benefit from receiving adequate Gifted Education services. We are recommending that an incentive program be funded and put into place for rural districts in order to close the underserved Gifted service gap.

Our final category is transportation. Transportation will be covered in detail in future testimony.

In closing, we ask our legislators and all Ohioans to consider H.B. 305 in its entirety, as an essential roadmap to guide school funding decisions. Together, we strive to ensure that Ohio's children will have the quality educational opportunities they need to succeed in a rapidly changing world. And together, we can adopt a comprehensive, fair school funding plan that meets the needs of Ohio's children, future workforce, and economy.

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions.