

**OHIO HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
FINANCE SUBCOMMITTEE
on
PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION
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by Eric Rensick, Vice President
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Chairman Cupp, Vice Chair Patterson, members of the committee and staff, I am honored to be here this morning to talk about the “Fair School Funding Plan” commonly known as Cupp-Patterson.

Though I watched your work develop with interest, though from a distance for a while, I became fully immersed in October when I attended the working group in Cuyahoga Falls.

As I did that day, I want to again compliment the two of you on your hard work, and also your willingness to step up to try to find a constitutional funding formula for Ohio’s schools.

The reason why Ohio has been funding its schools unconstitutionally for 22 years is because fixing it is difficult, in practice and politically, and I think we all understand that. We all understand that what the state of Ohio has been doing is, well, interesting, and not necessarily wise or fair.

That said, at the Cuyahoga Falls event I publicly praised your effort, and in a side bar with Rep. Patterson, praised you again. Rep. Cupp was unable to be there that day. And in both, adding to the praise, I reserved my judgement until the time when we could see the math.

I also raised three concerns, both publicly and one-on-one with Rep. Patterson:

1. That if you don’t deal with the accountability piece simultaneously, your funding model would not achieve your objective of *durability* because that would be the door through which subsequent general assemblies would harpoon it;
2. That there is no such thing as a *typical* student in Ohio; and
3. That while I agree in principle with separating aid to public school districts from charter schools, I could not support it becoming a

budgetary *sleight-of-hand* to shovel more money to charter schools, most of which are for-profit.

Rep. Patterson indicated that he agreed with me on all of these concerns, especially the accountability piece.

So here we are.

The plan has baked a little longer and we can see that nothing has been done to deal with the accountability piece, which general assemblies past have made complete mess; that this plan fails wildly because it did not recognize that there is no such thing as a *typical* student in Ohio, hence it is neither adequate nor equitable; and we're still waiting to see what happens with charter schools.

For all those reasons I ask that you either pump the brakes, so to speak, and do a little more work, or make sure that the adjustments get made now if it looks like this will become law. I agree completely with the testimony by the Ohio School Boards Association that more work needs to be done before the proposal is ready for adoption.

The Canton City School District, my district, is a very high poverty urban district with very little local property tax base from which to draw.

100 percent of our students are economically disadvantaged.

Nearly one in five have disabilities.

We have a growing population of students who don't speak English as a primary language.

Lack of housing stability is a huge challenge for us, with nearly 1,000 students every year becoming homeless as defined by McKinney-Vento. Student transience is a huge challenge for all of our elementary schools.

Hunger and food insecurity are huge problems for our families. We feed 100 percent of our students free of charge lunch, and breakfast, and some, through the after-school programs, also dinner. Some of these students would not eat otherwise.

Our students show up for Kindergarten with huge performance deficits as a result of poverty, instability and lack of enrichment. Compared to their peers in more affluent districts, our students have to grow

considerably more in a short period of time to pass the third grade reading requirements.

Only resources in the form of money allow us to meet these students' needs.

It is money that pays for professional expertise to translate for non-English speakers, to do intense academic intervention, to look after health and medical concerns, to transport homeless students so they don't miss school, and to provide mental health and wrap-around services at a level commensurate with the need.

Frankly, friends, if this funding model becomes law, you're going to kill us!

I was literally speechless when I read in the *Repository* that New Albany will get a 152 percent increase per pupil in state aid.

I know New Albany. My three nephews are New Albany graduates, and I admire the district.

But my nephews and their New Albany peers are no more *typical* than the students I am responsible for in Canton City. There's no comparison of the privilege and economic and lifestyle advantages of New Albany students *vs.* those in Canton City. None.

And I don't know if you have been to New Albany lately, but they have tremendous capacity to raise local funds through property taxes, as well as a community culture where schools are supported locally. People move there for the schools knowing their property taxes will be very high.

Canton City by contrast, is an area of last-resort housing, which means low property values, and because of the age and economic situation of our residents, there is not much capacity for more.

But our students have the constitutional right to an equitable education, just like my nephews did.

And this funding plan, which was supposed to be fair, means Canton City Schools funding increase by this plan is about one half of one percent!

152 percent for those with capacity *vs.* one half of one percent for those who don't.

This is devolution back to a time that was worse than pre-DeRolph unless you're an affluent district. Please forgive me for missing the fairness part of all this.

From the distribution calculator that accompanies this plan it appears that this proposal depends on the assumption that communities have the capacity to raise funds locally, and that's where it breaks down. That assumption is just plain wrong.

Our district and those similarly situated have survived over the last couple of budget cycles because of the devices in the formula that compensate for our lack of local capacity. What is offered here attempts to recognize that fact with words, then falls way short in practice. The simulations that accompanied the funding plan that bears your names is a complete disaster for the five year forecast of the Canton City School District. Any decline in enrolment further exacerbates the problem.

I also understand and recognize the challenges districts like Olentangy have with their explosive growth, and for the need for state policy to deal with their needs, too.

But I am here because I represent the Canton City School District, and I am telling you that his proposal completely fails because it fails to acknowledge that there are no typical students in Ohio, and that true equity demands that you acknowledge that as fact and stop trying to pretend that there are.

Students in Ohio under this plan will be educated according to their zip code.

Affluent students will be well-off and advantaged even more, and economically disadvantaged students will quickly move to their place, too, and it will be a position of a second class education.

This was not the promise you made when you embarked on this journey.

And before I leave, I want to address two related, though slightly tangential issues.

The first is tax abatement.

Right now school districts are at the mercy of other political subdivisions – in our case the city – which, because of unfairness in state law, can abate any increase in property tax capacity for a long period of time without the approval of the board of education.

So, potential increases in local property tax collection, which is critical for survival under this plan, can disappear to the bottom lines of developers while our kids do without even more.

Where is the acknowledgement in this plan or anywhere else, that this is a real problem for school districts? And where's the legislative fix?

Finally, all of these formulas would be easier if the pot of available money would be larger, and although the political climate is not favorable, someone needs to start telling the truth.

The state of Ohio now collects more state sales tax than income tax, which is highly regressive and means the state has less capacity to take care of its obligations, like public education, than it should.

This has come about due to a quarter century of tax cuts for people at the top of the income scale and highly profitable businesses.

Ohio needs to start talking about returning to a more progressive income tax structure, with those at the top return to the rates they were paying even 15 years ago. If the state had that money to work with, school districts and local governments, who are the providers of quality of life opportunities, could all be better off.

Back to the “Fair School Funding Plan” directly, the way it is right now is a disaster for the neediest of school districts and the students and families we serve, and over time it is a fast track to inequity where economically challenged school districts just can't make it.

That's why you must take more time and get it right for all districts.

That was the promise, after all.



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