

Sponsor Testimony – House Bill 148
Representatives Patterson and LaTourette

Chairman Hayes, Vice-Chairman Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the House Education Committee. Representative Patterson and I are here today to explain the nature of and rationale for, HB 148, legislation which if enacted, would provide a pathway for a unique and innovative school consolidation plan for rural Geauga County and, by extension, other similar areas of the state.

We have, in southeastern Geauga County, a very unique situation that affords an incredible opportunity for our students, our communities, and our districts. Currently there are four school districts examining the possibility of consolidation—but by the beginning of the next school year, there will be three as one of the districts, Ledgemont, will be transferred into the Berkshire School District. So, from this point forward in our testimony we will reference the 3 districts - Berkshire, Newbury, and Cardinal.

These three districts are all currently experiencing declining student enrollment. While there are various reasons for this: a declining and rapidly aging population in general; open enrollment to other districts; lower birthrates....a downward trend in student population is a reality our area will be dealing with for a while, further pointing to a need to address the situation.

In addition to enriching curriculum due to increased enrollment, consolidation of services should also result in less operational costs. Individuals much smarter than me have already begun crunching the numbers to see just how beneficial this could be. However, given the geographic nature of the proposed district (remember, this is in RURAL Geauga County) there is a real need for new facilities. The total service area would be over 200 square miles. Needed facility upgrades would include a newly constructed centralized high school as well as updates to four elementary schools.

However, property valuation remains very high in this area. The local share for new construction stands as the primary barrier to consolidation. The good news is, when school districts consolidate, they move to the front of the line for School Facility dollars. However, the local share required to access these funds will represent the lowest of the four/soon to be three districts. Currently that is: Cardinal at 83% (Newbury 92% ; and Berkshire 89%). Given the age of the population and the economic realities of our tax situation - consolidation, which would benefit students and community members alike, will not likely occur without some sort of assistance and cooperation from the state. That is where HB 148 comes into play, which Representative Patterson will further discuss in a minute.

In terms of facilitating a consolidation like this, we are extremely fortunate for three reasons.

First, literally down the street from Berkshire High School stands the campus of Kent State Geauga. The campus dean, Dr. Jarrod Tudor, the administration, and the new president of Kent

State, Dr. Beverly Warren are all on board with the possibility of new construction for a consolidated high school on the 87 acres of their campus in Burton. In fact, Dr. Tudor is one of the driving forces behind this concept. This campus also borders the Geauga County Fairgrounds—yet another extremely interested party for reasons to be discussed in a minute. And finally, Geauga County Growth Partnership is yet another driving force in this endeavor. Its director, Mr. Tracy Jemison, is committed to partnering the business community with the proposed school district—to the point of exploring an incubator type model for direct linkage from school to workforce.

Simply put, the plan would be to construct a 7-8 and a 11-12 STEM school on the campus of Kent State Geauga which would enhance the 9-10 STEM school administered by the Geauga County Educational Service Center on the Auburn Campus. {As a side note, the Auburn campus is currently being refurbished to welcome its first class of freshmen this fall which is the end result of receiving a multi-million dollar grant from the Straight A Fund. Hence, to provide maximum benefit from the STEM concept, the vision is to augment, not supplant the Auburn campus with opportunities on the Kent State Campus.}

In addition to the STEM school, a career tech center will be established on site with assistance from Geauga County Growth Partnership for those students who might not wish to pursue a STEM education. We also envision agricultural and vocational classes taught on-site by OSU Extension, which has an operational center next door at the Geauga County Fairgrounds – which would be a much needed curriculum addition in the County. Finally, the possibilities of College Credit plus are numerous with the high school's presence on one of the campuses of the second largest university in Ohio. This opportunity truly could be a game changer for innovative education in rural communities and is well worth our investment.

I'll now turn it over to Representative Patterson to share some additional information about both our bill and the consolidation plan.

In general terms, the concept, as outlined, is to consolidate one district out of the three with a 7-12 building on the campus of Kent State Geauga. Furthermore, four elementary schools would be updated at the time of the construction of the high school so that the whole district would reflect state-of-the-art facilities. One elementary would remain in each of the four main population centers: Thompson/Montville township (Ledgemont); Newbury township (Newbury); Burton Village (Berkshire); and Middlefield Village (Cardinal). This is imperative for two major reasons: 1) a short commute for elementary students; 2) local identity. The districts would surrender their K-12 identity for a shared one, but for parents and the local communities, we feel it is critically important to maintain a local presence for a sense of connectedness to the educational process. We want the communities to continue to feel a sense of pride in their local schools.

Though the legislation is rather straight forward, it still needs thorough vetting by the committee. We have outlined the benefits and the plan. We have also shared with you the demographic and economic realities of the area. Finally, you now know that this proposed district would move to the front on the line, but with an enormous local expense.

The bottom line is this: without the reduction of the local share, in all reality, this project will not get off the ground. We are proposing, in this legislation, a 50/50 split between the local entities and the School Facilities Commission. We realize that this is asking for a great deal. But if nothing is done and the local districts continue to wither away, what then? The reality is that with further general population decline coupled with a shrinking student population decline, efficiency of service and quality of education will suffer. This concept offers a chance for increased efficiency and increased quality and quantity for education.

Some might ask, at this point, what are the local districts giving up? The short answer is: everything. To consolidate a district is to lose a direct historical connection to the past. The teams, the trophies, the sense of oneness is sacrificed, to be sure. On the other hand, to stand idle and not seek to move forward is to possibly lose even more as these communities face changing demographic realities.

In future hearings we will listen to the Superintendents of the districts, treasurers and board members. The Dean of Kent State University, the Geauga County ESC Superintendent, and the president of the Geauga County Growth Partnership. Finally, the professional study group, hired by Kent State will offer testimony for you to consider.

None of us knows how this will turn out. As the legislation is permissive, it is possible that we could pass it and the districts could singularly or jointly, refuse to consolidate. Local control remains at the core of this legislation.

On another level, the legislation is narrowly defined to include only one county with a population of under 100,000. In this fashion, we will not open the door too wide not knowing, for sure, what this means for Geauga County, and potentially by extension, to other areas of the state that might qualify.

One thing is for sure, without the reduction of the local share, we will *never* know what might happen. Thank you for your attention; we will gladly answer any and all questions the committee may have.