

**ATTN: STATE REPRESENTATIVE CUPP
TESTIMONIAL for March 12, 2015
SUB-COMMITTEE: House Finance & Appropriations Primary & Secondary Education
Committees
Room #116, State House, Columbus
RE: HB 64
CONCERN: BIENNIAL BUDGET – ESC FUNDING CUTS**

TESTIMONIAL from:

Cathy Ruiz,

Parent Mentor, with Parent Mentors of Ohio Program

President, Executive Board, OCECD

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TESTIMONIAL – Cathy Ruiz, Parent Mentor:

Chairman Cupp and Members of the Sub-Committee:

From both a parent and professional prospective, I would like to share my concerns regarding Governor Kasich's proposed Biennial Budget House Bill 64. Specifically in regards to the executive proposed funding cut of 25% to the Educational Service Centers in Ohio in this biennium, as well as the executive proposal allowing certain districts that meet specific criteria to opt out of ESC alignment and support services. These two proposals combined will negatively impact direct student services provided to school districts by high quality, regional service providers.

From a personal standpoint, as a parent of two children with special needs, I have seen first-hand the positive impact the ESC can make toward student achievement.

My oldest son, who is now 20 years old, graduated from high school in the spring of 2013. At the age of 4, he was diagnosed with Autism. At that time he was practically non-verbal with very limited language. Behavior issues also accompanied his Autism. He began receiving early intervention through developmental preschool provided at our elementary school at age 4. Due to his Autism, it was decided through his Evaluation Team Report and IEP that a full-time aide be provided. He also received related services which were Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy and Speech Therapy. He received special interventions for some of his subjects in the resource room with the Intervention Specialist. All of these special related supports and services were provided through our local Educational Service Center.

Throughout our son's years of receiving education in the public school, it continued to be necessary that he remain on an IEP and receive special interventions and related services to help him be as successful as possible. Though he excelled academically, and was on the honor roll almost every grading period, he still continues to be greatly limited with his social and independent living skills. Our local school district, in collaboration with our ESC, provided an excellent education through the years for our son by making sure the needed supports, services and interventions were in place to help our son achieve to the best of his ability. He graduated with a full accredited diploma! We as parents are so proud of his accomplishments in the midst of his disability

At the age of 5 years old, our youngest son whom we have adopted, was placed in our home through therapeutic foster care 8 years ago. At that time he came to us with the diagnosis of ADHD. We had been told he would be a challenge before he was even placed with us. But with each passing year since he has been in our home we have seen more and more unacceptable behaviors manifest themselves.

At the age of 7 he was hospitalized for 8 days in a behavior health center due to those escalated bad behaviors. It was then he was also diagnosed by a psychiatrist with Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), Impulse Control Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Multi Mood Disorder and Borderline Depression, in addition to the ADHD. He was on an IEP receiving interventions for math, provided by the Intervention Specialist. His severe behaviors continued to manifest themselves making it difficult to be successful in the public school setting, where he was barely maintaining, let alone succeeding academically.

It was decided by us, his parents, and the IEP Team, that he attend school at The Resource Center. As an alternative school, the Resource Center which is funded through our local ESC, has been the perfect placement for our son. The Resource Center provides a structured, closely monitored atmosphere equipped with trained teaching staff to not only address the academic needs, but also the behavior issues of the student through an individualized program. A counselor from our behavioral health center is on staff as well, meeting one on one with a student when a behavior issues arises, as well as, providing group therapy with the students.

Since our son has been attending The Resource Center and his behavior issues are being addressed with consistent alternative behavior strategies, the behavior issues have decreased. Academically we are starting to see our son actually succeed, not just maintain. He possesses a greater interest in school with a better, more positive outlook on his future once he graduates.

As a parent of two children with special needs, I have done my very best through the years to provide the love, supports and interventions that they need at home to help them be as successful as possible. I just cannot imagine where they would be now academically if it weren't for the excellent supports, services and interventions provided by our ESC and The Resource Center. Our ESC has played a very important vital role in helping my sons to be as successful as possible in academic achievement, for which I am so very grateful.

PROFESSIONALLY:

I have had the pleasure of working in the position of Parent Mentor in our county through our ESC for the past 7 ½ years. Twenty-five percent (25%) of the approximate-80 Parent Mentor sites in the State of Ohio are contracted through an ESC. The Parent Mentor Program is funded through the ODE-OEC and the Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities.

As a Parent Mentor I provide supports and services to parents of children with special needs, and to the school districts who serve them. Daily I see the important role our ESC plays in the lives of our students with special needs at both district and county levels. I thoroughly enjoy working with parents of children with special needs, trying to help bridge that communication between home and school.

Whether a child is in need of speech only, is delayed with fine motor skills and needs to receive PT or OT related services, or has a cognitive delay and needs additional help with math or language through the Intervention Specialist, whatever the special needs may be the ESC can offer those related services helping the student to achieve success.

I also serve as President on the Executive Board, with the Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities (OCECD). It is with great honor I serve in this capacity as we continually strive to find new ways to improve the education provided for our kids with special needs.

Margaret Burley, Executive Director, with the Coalition submitted a letter addressed to you, Chairman Cupp in regards to the Governor's special education funding proposal contained in HB 64.

Ohio has a sound special education finance structure that requires students with disabilities to receive general foundation aid and to receive additional weighted funding (through six categories of weights). The OCECD would like to see the weighted funding updated to be fully funded using a phased-in approach over the next two biennia. The OCECD firmly believes that students with disabilities be treated fairly and equally by providing them at least as much of a funding increase as received by those students in regular education. The OCECD is readily available to work with you and your colleagues on behalf of the nearly 250,000 students with disabilities in Ohio's public schools.

The OCECD's mission and the work which they do is in line with the ESCs, to ensure that all children with disabilities in Ohio receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

From the professional standpoint locally, regionally and at the state level I see over and over again first hand the positive impact our ESCs have on student achievement through interventions, supports and services for our kids with special needs. They are a key agency within our school districts in order for best student academic achievement outcome possible to take place.

EFFECT OF ESC FUNDING CUTS:

The ESC plays a vital role in student success and achievement for those students with special needs, meeting their needs individually through related supports and services.

We must look at the end results, and student achievement and success if the ESC funding is to be cut yet again in this biennial budget.

Yes the districts can still purchase services through ESCs, but with the loss of state funding ESCs will have no choice but to close their doors.

The blaring question then would be, who will offer those very necessary related services for our students with special needs? Currently ESCs save the school districts considerably for those services.

And what about FAPE? For example, what happens to the student who displays severe behaviors in the public school setting and is a constant disruption, hindering learning for not only himself but for the rest of the class as well? Without the alternative school setting, for example, the chances for those students to be academically successful is greatly reduced.

The public schools have zero tolerance for disruptive behavior and are just plain not equipped to deal with at-risk student who displays severe disruptive behaviors. There would be no place left for that student to go. Continued state funding for our ESCs must continue for them to provide successful shared services with the Ohio school districts in order for student achievement to move ever forward. As both a parent and professional, I would greatly appreciate your support restoring at least the 25% funding cut to our ESCs.