

House Finance Primary and Secondary Education Subcommittee  
House Bill 64 Testimony  
Mrs. Julie Ramos, Superintendent  
Ledgemont Local Schools  
March 18, 2015

Chairman Cupp, Ranking Member Phillips, and members of the Primary and Secondary Education Subcommittee of the Ohio House Finance and Appropriations Committee, my name is Julie Ramos, and I am Superintendent of the Ledgemont Local School District located in Geauga County. My testimony today is intended to propose a more proactive approach to supporting small, financially struggling school districts whose enrollment trends are declining. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on House Bill 64, the biennial budget bill for Ohio.

In my three years tenure as leader of schools at Ledgemont, this is my third time testifying in front of state legislators on behalf of the district. With this being said, my goal today is to begin dialogue that would ultimately prevent school districts in Ohio whose situations are similar to Ledgemont's, to have to endure what the students, staff, and community have had to endure in the past several years. The financial situation and declining enrollment that Ledgemont was in when I took the helm in 2012 did not begin in 2012. It was a concern that was years, perhaps even decades, in the making. The once proud traditions of academics and athletics at Ledgemont School District no longer exist.

In October 2013, I testified on behalf of HB 216, which proposed the following: in order for a school district to qualify for debt forgiveness, the district must be voluntarily dissolved and transferred to a contiguous school district, the district must already owe at least 33 percent of its operating budget for the current fiscal year to the Solvency Assistance Fund, up to \$10 million, and have remained in a state of fiscal emergency during the previous two fiscal years. Additionally, the acquiring school district must provide the state with a five year solvency plan in order to absorb the transferring school district. During my testimony, I stated "We at Ledgemont have been judicious in our use of taxpayers' dollars, all the while maintaining a high level of instruction and sense of community. The school board has diligently, over many years, pursued a greater level of funding from the community. The list of levy attempts is long, with some passages but many more failures." Six months prior to my 2013 testimony, the school board proposed an emergency five-year 14.7 mil levy, with the goal of getting out of fiscal emergency. The passage of such a hefty levy would not even have brought back former programming. The levy was defeated. The school board was trying its best to provide for the students of the district, and was told that in the State of Ohio local public school funding is controlled "at the local level." However, there is no help from any corner, state or local, for the district to implement that local control. At the state level, the talk is always about "taxpayer relief," but no talk about any community's obligation to fund the education of its future citizens, no talk about support for general education, no words of encouragement for local schools and the important and always unsung work the teachers are doing. I repeat, the talk has always been

about “taxpayer relief,” not for long-term investment in the day-to-day work of parents, kids, teachers, and communities within local public schools.

The passage of HB 216 did provide one small tool to use to help the aforementioned stakeholders. It gave our district an option to discuss consolidation or merger with a neighboring, friendly district. Without this provision, our district would still be floundering in debt that is nearly 50% of our operating budget, offering the boys and girls in our community state minimums in academics, and very few extra opportunities to participate in co-curricular activities, thus putting our boys and girls at a distinct disadvantage in an exponentially increasing global community and economy. However, the timing of this tool came at a cost. Due to lack of state and local support, enrollment has been cut nearly in half in the last few years, programs have been depleted, and the community has been divided. None of these are what’s best for kids.

The passage of HB 216 afforded the opportunity for Ledgesmont Schools to move forward in the process of a territory transfer. As of March 9<sup>th</sup>, the Ledgesmont School District and Berkshire School District have nearly finalized the process of this transfer, with the results being that next school year, Berkshire School District will now be comprised of Ledgesmont’s current communities as well as its own. This is a good thing. Kids will have more academic offerings, more co-curricular choices, and a more stable financial future, pending changes in the current governor’s school funding proposal. One provision of HB 216 as it applied to the territory transfer of districts is the prospect of fiscal sustainability. The “new” Berkshire School District will be financially solvent for the next five years according to the district’s five-year forecast created with assumptions stated in HB 216/487. However, if the governor’s budget as it is currently proposed is passed by the legislature, this will not be the case. This proposed budget would put the “new” Berkshire in a dire financial situation. In fact, in two years, the district will lose nearly 20% of its state funding.

With that being said, please consider the following points. I recognize that the state currently conducts consolidation and enrollment studies. In addition, I realize the governor supports shared services. Please, be a proactive legislature. Instead of waiting for years for a small district, of which there are many in Ohio, to be floundering in the Solvency Assistance Fund with declining enrollment, accumulating debt, and all the while losing course offerings and dividing communities, and in the addition to a more competitive global economy, I urge you to utilize the your legislative powers as well as the current tools in place to prevent this from happening in communities statewide, the results of which will last generations. If no proactive actions take place, these results will have a negative impact on kids, communities, and the State of Ohio at large. A proactive approach could very well provide more and better opportunities for kids, strengthen communities, and improve the overall economic future of Ohio.

Currently, the debt forgiveness option is available for all districts in the State of Ohio. However, as legislators in Ohio, you have the power to prevent a situation like Ledgesmont, a district that has struggled economically for years, by enacting legislation that would be the catalyst for consolidation, merging, or territory transfer with another district. While there are currently several options for districts to consolidate, no threshold exists, where, for the sake of students, schools are required to begin looking at this process. Ledgesmont has suffered a slow, painful educational death. Had the district been required to begin looking at this process when troubles

began, several classes of students may have avoided minimal educational opportunities. Again, for the sake of the boys and girls as well as the future of the State of Ohio, please be proactive; please consider the passage of legislation that would require districts that are overseen by the Fiscal Commission, and that reach an pre-determined threshold of debt, to be required to have a consolidation study performed, with the ultimate goal of providing additional educational opportunities for children.

I welcome continued conversations about working together to create opportunities for districts and communities that face similar circumstances. Please, I urge you, if you take into consideration any or all of my testimony, to utilize me as a resource that could provide guidance to this committee and/or districts whose situations are similar to Ledgemont Local Schools.

Thank you for allowing me to speak before you today.