



**State School  
for the Blind**



## **Testimony on the Ohio State School for the Blind Budget Provisions of House Bill 49, the FY18-19 Biennial Budget**

Ohio House of Representatives  
Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education  
Representative Robert R. Cupp, Chair  
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Chairman Cupp, Ranking Member Miller and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the Ohio State School for the Blind's budget provision sections of House Bill 49, the Fiscal Year 2018-2019 Biennial Budget. I am Denyse Woods, interim superintendent at the Ohio State School for the Blind.

As the first public school for the blind in the United States, the Ohio State School for the Blind has been continuously educating students since 1837. We offer comprehensive educational opportunities to approximately 125 students in prekindergarten through high school, vocational options for our older students and a joint Early Learning Center with the Ohio School for the Deaf to help our youngest population position itself for a seamless transition to elementary school. The Ohio State School for the Blind is dedicated to the intellectual, social, physical and emotional growth of all students with visual impairments. Our mission is to work cooperatively with students, families and the community to provide an effective, enjoyable educational experience through specialized curriculum, equipment, materials and individualized, disability-specific instruction to develop our students' unique potential. Our work, while primarily focused on the students in our school, expands to blind or vision impaired youth throughout the state of Ohio through resources, evaluations and recommendations for best practices in their home school districts provided by our Statewide Services department.

Gov. Kasich's budget recommends General Revenue Fund appropriations for the Ohio State School for the Blind of \$10.3 million in FY18 and \$10.5 million in FY19. These numbers represent a growth of 3.7 percent in FY18 over FY17 and another 2.3 percent increase in FY19 over FY18. These modest increases in GRF appropriations are critical to maintaining service levels at the school. Primarily, the increase will be utilized to meet existing payroll costs. While the school has seen a decline in federal funding, GRF increases in prior budget cycles and operational efficiencies achieved through our partnership with the Ohio School for the Deaf have sustained service levels.

As a residential school facility for the state, our funding is not driven by enrollment and per pupil allocations like traditional school districts. Rather, we are funded like any other state agency. Our capacity is tied directly to our GRF allocations, which this year comprises more than 90 percent of the school's total budget. This presents challenges for us, especially as we continue to have more and more students and families seeking our services. As we gain additional students, we do not gain additional funding. Due to the requirements related to serving students with disabilities and our funding limitations, we are in a situation where we are at capacity in grades 4-6, and we have reached the limit of students who have multiple disabilities that we can serve in grades K-2. This is a sad situation for students whose home districts have limited capacity to meet their unique needs as we are unable to help them grow and flourish in accordance with our charter. The residential component of our school also is currently at capacity. We would require additional funds above the executive budget recommendations to staff and support future students outside of the central Ohio region.

For a child with blindness or visual impairment, an appropriate education includes all general education course content including reading, math and science, but it also includes what is commonly called the "expanded core curriculum," such as independent living skills, social interaction skills, recreation and leisure skills, career education, orientation and mobility, and communication skills utilizing Braille and/or assistive technology. These skill areas are especially important to students with disabilities beyond blindness. Both traditional and specialized school settings deliver general education and expanded core curriculum; however, some students require a level of intensity in these areas that is only available in a specialized school such as the Ohio State School for the Blind. Every student receives instruction and guidance from highly qualified staff specially trained to work with children and young adults who are blind and visually impaired. The majority of the recommended increase in GRF appropriations is to ensure that we can maintain our current staff levels.

Students at the school participate in academic programming in preschool through high school that aligns with Ohio's academic content standards. Every student has an individualized education program that ensures that the education provided focuses on each student's individual needs and abilities as well as accounts for specialized services, such as occupational, physical or speech therapy, psychological services or adaptive technology. Additionally, half of our students have multiple disabilities that require specialized services and extensive resources to meet their additional needs. Our students experience music and adaptive physical education activities as part of the curriculum at the school, and we hold the proud distinction of being the first blind high school marching band to perform in the New Year's Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, California. Each year our marching band seeks to display the hard work and dedication of our members through opportunities such as the Circleville Pumpkin Show parade and playing during a Capital University football game.

Nearly half of our students come from districts outside daily commuting distance, so these students are able to take advantage of our residential program. The residential component of our program supports and furthers the work our educational staff provides during the day by assisting students in acquiring social-emotional and independent living skills in the evening. Our youth leaders oversee and participate in structured activities for all residential students

during non-class hours, Sunday afternoon through Thursday. Students usually return home for weekends and holidays, with a few exceptions for special sporting or other school activities scheduled on the weekends.

We utilize six dorms that have state of the art technology and provide the opportunity for our students to be both comfortable and safe while in residence on our campus. Each year we find increased costs associated with the operation of our facilities dictates funding be directed to these facilities, including maintenance, food service and utilities. In addition to providing a top-notch education, the safety and security of our students is a primary focus. To assist in this, 24-hour security is available to act as a first line of defense for any threat to the health, safety and welfare of our students.

Students at the school and others with blindness or vision loss throughout the state are able to participate in summer programs that we offer in the form of day or residential camps to extend their learning opportunities beyond the traditional school year. Last summer, we were excited to offer nearly a dozen camps to our learners. Our limited funding has put these camps at risk in recent years. While serving students during the traditional academic year is our main concern, these camps are extremely valuable to our students and their families as they learn to navigate the challenges they face.

Blind and visually impaired students may lack specialized programs and services in their home districts due to financial constraints or other reasons. Many public school systems do not have staff with training and expertise to work with learners who are blind, visually impaired or have multiple disabilities. Many have no experience with learners whose learning modality is hands-on and auditory rather than visual. To aid Ohio school districts and the approximately 938 blind and visually impaired students not at our school, we provide limited technical assistance, parent mentoring, assessments and consultations, multi-factored evaluations and much more. We also collaborate with Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities to support employment needs for individuals with disabilities.

Our services and resources are vital for students who are visually impaired throughout the state. We strive to provide our students the knowledge and life skills necessary for them to succeed in life after they leave our campus in whatever they choose to do. The recommended increases included in the governor's budget will allow the school to continue to provide a high-quality education to Ohio's visually impaired students and ensure their safety and security.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. We are proud of the work we do and the students we serve. I am now happy to answer any questions you have.