



## **Testimony on the Ohio School for the Deaf 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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Doug Lowery, Superintendent  
Ohio School for the Deaf

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 School for the Deaf's budget provision sections of House Bill 49, the Fiscal Year 2018-2019 Biennial Budget. I am Doug Lowery, superintendent at the Ohio School for the Deaf.

I would like to take a quick moment to say a word about our school. The Ohio School for the Deaf has been in operation since 1829, serving deaf and hearing-impaired students, as well as those with other disabilities. Currently, we have more than 200 students receiving an education on our campus located on Morse Road just north of downtown Columbus. Our students come here from all across Ohio, representing 91 school districts in 51 counties this school year. We are currently the sixth largest standalone deaf school in the United States. Our mission is to provide specialized education and outreach services in partnership with families, communities and professionals, so that all deaf and hard of hearing children have access to a comprehensive educational and socialization program with direct communication. This prepares them to become productive citizens and empowers them to learn, thrive and belong. Also, we provide information and resources to school districts and families across the state, benefiting 2,029 additional students.

Gov. Kasich's budget recommends General Revenue Fund appropriation for the Ohio School for the Deaf of \$11.0 million in FY18 and \$11.2 million in FY19. These numbers represent a growth of 2.9 percent in FY18 over FY17 and another 2.1 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 allow us to continue to meet our current operating needs. Increases provided in the current biennial budget and mid-biennium review allowed us to continue our operations. Moving forward, the future of our school is dependent on necessary increases in our funding.

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 all of our multiple disability classrooms and very near capacity in many of our elementary and high school regular education programs. This is a sad situation for students whose home districts have limited capacity to meet their unique needs and assist them in entering the workforce upon graduation.

Educating deaf learners is a complex and highly specialized undertaking. Deafness is a severe disability that affects the development of speech, language acquisition and academic skills. Without language development in the home, children grow up without words to describe what they see around them, knowledge of everyday events or the incidental learning that comes from watching TV, listening to children's music or rhymes, or storybooks read aloud. As these children approach kindergarten, they lack comparable vocabulary skills or the early learning connections that most preschoolers make as they prepare for schooling. If these children do not receive intensive, small-group instruction from highly qualified teachers of the deaf or access to specialists knowledgeable about hearing loss in the elementary years, the achievement gaps become greater. National statistics indicate that the average deaf or hard of hearing individual leaves high school reading between a grade level of 2.8 and 4.5.

Without language and the ability to hear language, instruction becomes dependent on the use of exceptional methods. At the Ohio School for the Deaf, we employ instructional methods that include small class sizes (typically eight students to one teacher), assistive communication devices, amplification and specially trained teachers who are fluent in sign language. Also, we have specialists on staff who provide speech-language therapy, tutoring in sign language, occupational and physical therapy, and counseling. Our efforts enable students to leave high school ready to go to work or attend postsecondary education and training. The majority of the recommended increase in GRF appropriations is to ensure the current staff continues to be fully funded and recommended staffing levels are maintained. The Ohio School for the Deaf is excited to have a growing student population; however, we have reached our capacity for most age groups as we are unable to fund additional teacher positions to increase the number of classrooms. With our current budget, we have already reallocated our staffing resources to do what we can to provide opportunities for students to join our campus, but we continue to have a wait list for many of our grades.

The Ohio School for the Deaf is a vital resource to many communities as local school districts often find it difficult to meet the comprehensive needs of students who are deaf or hearing impaired. We offer a residential program that supports the work of the educational program and assists students in acquiring social-emotional and independent living skills. Staff designated as youth leaders provide structured activities for all residential students during non-class hours, Sunday afternoon through Thursday, with students usually returning home for weekends and holidays.

For many of our students, especially in the residential program, the Ohio School for the Deaf is a second home as they spend more time here than with their families. While we operate

independently from our sister school, the Ohio State School for the Blind, we do share some resources such as food service, maintenance, human resources, custodial services, transportation, health services and business operations. While we opened six new dormitories in 2012, the needs of students show we are outgrowing our current space. As a result, we are exploring plans to construct more residential space (currently, nearly 55 percent of our students reside on campus during the week). The most recent capital budget included funding to add two additional dormitories to the campus. This will increase the operating costs of the campus. The governor's executive proposal reflects the estimated increases associated with maintaining and running these facilities.

As a residential facility, the safety and security of our students and staff is of the utmost importance. Our security team has worked aggressively in the last two years to provide quality security enhancements, but the terrain and location of our campus allows for future security needs to be put in place. The executive budget will ensure the protection of all who work and learn at our school.

The school is proud to offer students who are deaf or hearing impaired the opportunity to participate in summer programs to extend their learning beyond the traditional school year. During the summer of 2016, we were fortunate to host more than a dozen camps and programs to deaf and hearing-impaired persons from preschool age to adults and ranging from STEAM/STEM camps to driver's education to American Sign Language classes. We even had working opportunities for students to learn about various jobs and volunteer options in the community. 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.

Outside of the Ohio School for the Deaf, students who are deaf and hearing impaired are often served in locations where specialized programs and services do not exist or are limited. The school provides support services through our Interactive Video Distance Learning program through which we teach American Sign Language to small groups of deaf and hard of hearing students attending public schools. We also provide evaluations at the request of local school districts as they examine students' needs to assist with individualized education program development.

The Ohio School for the Deaf is an important educational option for students who are deaf or hearing impaired in Ohio. Our students have the ability to gain the knowledge and life skills necessary to live independent and productive lives. We welcome this challenge and are inspired daily by the students and families we serve. The recommended increases included in the governor's budget will allow the school to continue to provide a high-quality education to Ohio's deaf and hearing-impaired students and ensure their safety and security. Without the increases, we will reduce programs, decrease staffing levels and turn away an even greater number of students who would benefit from attending.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am now happy to answer any questions you have.