September 26, 2017

Chairman Lehner, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee:

My name is Tony Dunn. I currently serve as Superintendent of Belpre City Schools in Southeast Ohio. I am in my thirty-first year as an educator, having served as a classroom teacher, athletic director, coach, school counselor, assistant principal, principal, transportation director, and superintendent. Those positions have given me experiences in large suburban schools, small urbans schools, and a small rural school. Those districts in which I have served have great socio-economic diversity, from the relative wealth of Madeira City Schools in the greater Cincinnati area to the relative poverty of my current position with Belpre City Schools.

I am here to urge your support for Senate Bill 39, which would bring some much needed accountability to Ohio’s e-schools or online schools, and work toward fiscal responsibility within our state.

As an educator and taxpayer in the State of Ohio, I am extremely concerned about the tax dollars that are being wasted due to the lack of accountability at some of Ohio’s online schools. As the Superintendent of a traditional public school in Ohio that suffers tremendous challenges financially given our current funding situation, I urge you to look long and hard at a funding system that has been declared unconstitutional for two decades and find ways to help our precious tax dollars flow to the places of greatest need. Some simple accountability for online schools could make a world of difference for all the public schools in Ohio.

Senate Bill 39 continues with some of that basic accountability that has already begun thanks to some monumental efforts by people like William Phillis, Executive Director of the Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy for School Funding. Mr. Phillis has served Ohio’s public schools in myriad capacities for almost sixty (60) years, and has been a major contributor to the work in Ohio around school funding. His exposure of the attendance issues surrounding the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT) has been invaluable as an example of what is wrong with our funding and oversight of our tax dollars. The sixty million dollars ECOT has been ordered to repay would certainly go a long way to plugging some of the holes we have in our current funding scheme.

The bill requires an e-school to monitor the academic performance of each student and evaluate the continued enrollment in the school with the student’s parent/guardian, teachers, and the principal. This is something we have been doing in traditional schools all along and should not be that difficult to replicate given the technology available to e-schools and their students. This bill also requires a student participation log and an accurate report of the number of hours each student is actively participating in learning opportunities. While there are many challenges to creating and monitoring such logs, the discussion of what it means to be an e-school students must center around those academic and social experiences kids need to become active, contributing citizens.

The time to break the code of secrecy with regards to e-school governance and funding is now. Governing board meetings which happen outside the clear view of the public, if at all, can be brought to tax payers by live-streaming on the internet as suggested in this bill. All activities of these governing boards should be subject to the same Sunshine Laws by which we must all abide. Funding accountability should also follow the same reporting guidelines that make all our tax dollars transparent to our communities. Any system that allows for anything less than full disclosure should be changed immediately.

In Belpre, we currently have twenty-eight (28) students who attend e-schools outside the one we provide as part of our regular programming. For those students, we have approximately $175,000.00 subtracted from the funding provided to us by the State of Ohio. Some very simple arithmetic will tell us that for every student attending an e-school instead of Belpre Elementary or Belpre High School, we enjoy a deduction from our foundation payments of just more than $6000.00 per student. Compare that $6000.00 to the $2734.00 Belpre City Schools currently receives from the State for each student we educate and it becomes glaringly evident that those e-school students take with them just over $3200.00 of locally voted money to a school outside our community and outside the watchful eyes of concerned citizens. It has been explained to me several times that local dollars do not leave a school district when a student leaves for an e-school, but that is simply untrue in every case I know. While this bill doesn’t address the funding debacle in Ohio’s public schools, it does offer some relief to public schools should the Auditor of State issue a finding for recovery to an e-school for non-attendance students. I can only hope, as the Superintendent of a district that is shorted just over $1 million dollars per year due to the funding cap currently in our funding mechanism, that this unconstitutional funding system will more fully explored soon and we can find a way to adequately fund our public schools in Ohio. Our taxpayers deserve nothing less.

House Bill 39 will not solve all the problems surrounding e-schools in Ohio. Until we find a way to fund e-schools without taking local tax dollars to support that effort, we will continue to struggle with an equity issue. Indeed, until we all play by the same rules, someone will be at a disadvantage. I urge the committee to discuss and debate this bill and finally land on some legislation that provides more accountability and transparency and is good for the young people in our state.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today and I will happily attempt to answer any questions the committee may have for me.