Senate Testimony

December 6, 2017

Senator Lehner and members of the Senate Education Committee:

I am Thomas J Lasley and thank you for this opportunity to offer interested party testimony relative to SB 216. I have been in a number of educational roles for my entire professional life, from classroom teacher to the Ohio Department of Education (as an Assistant Director) to the University of Dayton (as a Professor and Dean). I currently serve as CEO of a cradle-to-career initiative that focuses on getting more young people to and through credential and degree programs. In each role I have been committed to making a difference in the lives of young people and I value the role that all of us can play in making schools vital institutions.

Senate Bill 216 is designed to eliminate unnecessary regulation. It represents an important opportunity for Ohio's educators and policy makers to implement practices that will make Ohio’s schools stronger, better and more efficient.

Before I discuss my specific recommendations, let me share a couple of thoughts about deregulation generally.

By definition, deregulation reduces restrictions and requirements with the goal of improving operations and increasing efficiency. Educators across the state have long complained about legislative overreach and unfunded mandates. SB216 is a chance to respond to that criticism and to create more balance in terms of what is expected and required in the operation of Ohio’s schools.

But deregulation can have dramatic unintended consequences. Too often the negative impact of deregulation impacts the most vulnerable populations. In this instance of educational deregulation, it's important to guard against unintentionally enacting policies that encourage and promote practices that disadvantage our high-needs students -- many of whom are concentrated in our rural and urban communities.

Though I have reservations about several aspects of SB216, allow me to speak to two specific items.

The first is the proposal to eliminate the kindergarten readiness diagnostic assessment. Eliminating the KRA for Ohio’s earliest learners would be a huge mistake.

Educators need to know where students stand when they enter school.

Specifically, we as a state need to know how many of our children are -- and are not -- starting kindergarten on track and ready to learn. We can't fix problems if we don't know that they exist. Data can compel us to do better. Eliminating this assessment will allow us to bury our heads and to pretend we don't have a problem when clearly we do. We know that kindergarten readiness is a predictor of third grade reading proficiency…given that relationship, it is imperative that teachers in those early grades have the information that they need to guide the learning of our earliest learners.

Kindergarten assessments emerged several years ago because early grade teachers needed to know more about the students they were teaching and policy makers wanted to highlight the skill discrepancy of children entering kindergarten, a problem that was particularly acute for children in urban contexts. We went from the KRA - L, which was relatively easy to administer, to the KRA in 2017. The KRA, as currently administered, is very time-consuming and staff-intensive and is less advantageous for instructional purposes.

SB 216 takes a hammer to a problem that requires a knife. Rather than dispensing with the KRA, we should debate how to modify it. We should adopt a kindergarten assessment that provides teachers with the information they need for instructional purposes without requiring them to spend so much time assessing their students that they don't have enough time to teach.

I urge you: Please don’t eliminate some type of kindergarten assessment. Take this opportunity to improve it and to address the problems that early grade teachers legitimately say are burdensome and onerous. Don’t eliminate a tool that is essential for knowing where students stand cognitively when they enter Ohio’s educational system.

Now about my second concern:

One reason so many school administrators are in favor of SB216 is that it acknowledges the reality that many teaching positions are hard to fill with qualified educators. The proposed "fix" is to allow administrators to place teachers in a variety of classroom assignments, and even in positions for which they are not licensed.

Notwithstanding many districts' real hiring challenges, this change would open the doors to practices that could and would harm the very students who are most in need of highly trained teachers.

Typically, it is administrators in rural and urban school districts who have the most difficulty filling teaching positions. But these are precisely the districts where students often lack the educational and enrichment opportunities that are the norm for better-off students, both at home and in their communities. These disadvantaged children are precisely the students who most need quality and highly trained teachers.

Many administrators want to go back to the licensure bands that we had about 20 years ago, bands that were similar to the old 1 - 8 and 7 - 12 licenses that were in place when I started my career DECADES ago.

Instituting two broad licensure bands – especially the K – 8 licensure band – would make hiring and placing teachers in classrooms easier. But we should not forget that we moved away from those overlywide and generic bands for sound reasons.

Simply put, too often teachers weren't sufficiently trained to teach the children they had in their classrooms. Too many teachers didn't have either the content understandings or pedagogical skills they needed to be effective for the students that they were assigned to teach.

Think about it: Teaching a 1st-grader the foundation of reading requires very different training and skills than teaching 6th- or 8th graders how to read for comprehension. The same is true for other subjects. Teaching science, history or math in the early years requires different content knowledge and different instructional practices than is needed for middle-school students.

It is true that teachers with the “new” 6-12 license could teach in those critical middle grades, but this again will cause us to revisit a problem evidenced 20 years ago when we made the previous switch: the teachers with the high school license wanted to teach high school…far too few wanted middle grade assignments, which is part of the reason the state created a special license for those middle grades!

The notion that teaching is teaching, and anyone can teach any subject, in any grade, defies common sense and everything we know about how to help children learn and excel. It also goes against well-established research relative to the relationship between teacher knowledge of subject matter and student achievement…a relationship that has been documented by researchers and professional groups such as the National Mathematics Advisory Panel ( see endnote).

You wouldn't go to a malpractice lawyer to defend you in a contract dispute. You wouldn't go to an orthopedic surgeon to put in a pacemaker. The same principle applies in education. Teaching children is a specialized and precise profession -- never more so than in the competitive knowledge rich environment that students are a part of today.

IF you decide to revert to former practices that were abandoned for good cause and move to adopt licensure bands requiring little specific grade- or age-level expertise, students in our most affluent districts still will have highly trained teachers and get the instruction they deserve. Administrators in those districts typically can choose from multiple applicants who have the requisite disciplinary background and/or teaching skills. These affluent districts *will continue* to fill their schools with teachers who can genuinely meet the needs of students.

However, the districts that have large numbers of high-need students and more limited resources will be allowed to compromise on the quality of student instruction. They may hire, or place in a classroom, anyone who has a license and can manage students -- regardless of whether the teacher has the subject matter background and/or pedagogy to meet the needs of the children he or she's instructing.

I urge you NOT to support the “K – 8 license grade band” solution. This proposed “fix” would be like hitting a fly with a sledge hammer and our most vulnerable students would be the ones getting hammered!

Please try to find a middle ground between where we were and where we are! Rather than going back to the equivalent of the 1 – 8 license, we should debate how to solve the problem in a way that helps all Ohio’s students, regardless of their zip code. We should provide administrators with the flexibility to place teachers in a variety of 1 – 8 classroom assignments, with some appropriate expectations regarding the support, mentoring, and/or required additional coursework they might need and that can be secured over a specified period of time. At a minimum, teachers in grades 1 – 8 must be required to receive the specialized training, or get the endorsements ( or continuing education ), that qualifies them to teach effectively in their assigned classrooms.

As you consider possible compromises or alternatives to this licensure provision, it is important to note that some flexibility already exists in the form of supplementary licensure, a process that was most recently improved and made even more flexible. That is, for teachers who want or need to teach outside of their licensure area, they can pass a content exam (administered through ODE) and then may have to take a pedagogy class, but they can do so while in their “new” classroom assignment. This provides some flexibility for administrators. The question is: What additional flexibility is appropriate, necessary and justified without shortchanging the needs of students?

Again, we do need to reduce restrictions and requirements with the goal of improving operations, increasing efficiency, and eliminating unfunded mandates. However, let’s do so without having significant and negative unintended consequences, which would potentially bring us all back here in two or three years to deal with those.

It's my belief that in the name of deregulation reform, these two SB216 proposed “fixes” may or perhaps will exacerbate Ohio's profound and well-documented achievement gap.

For Ohio to have the intellectual capital that it needs to compete for good jobs, our goal must be that all students start school on track and be ready to learn in kindergarten. That requires teachers’ assessing the readiness of all early learners when they enter their kindergarten classrooms.

And, second, we must make sure all students have highly qualified teachers throughout their P-12 education experiences. That necessity compels us to have licensure requirements that insist on adequate teacher preparation. Putting just any licensed teacher at the head of the class is not good for children, and it's not good for us as a State.

NOTE:

For additional research on the importance of subject matter knowledge see:

T. Dee and S. Cohodes, "Out-of-Field Teachers and Student Achievement: Evidence from Matched-Pairs Comparisons." Public Finance Review, Volume 36, No. 1, January 2008, pp. 7-32.

B. Chaney, "Student outcomes and the professional preparation of eighth-grade teachers in science and mathematics," in NSF/NELS:88 Teacher transcript analysis, 1995, ERIC, ED389530.

H. Wenglinsky, How Teaching Matters: Bringing the Classroom Back Into Discussions of Teacher Quality (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2000).

U.S. Department of Education. Foundations for Success: The Final Report of the National Mathematics Advisory Panel. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education (2008).