



209 Lowell Street • Castalia, OH 44824
419-684-5402 • Fax 419-684-5537

HB 49, State Budget
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Ohio Senate Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education
Pete Bartkowiak, Superintendent of Townsend Community School

Chairman Hite, Vice Chair Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, I am Pete Bartkowiak, Superintendent of Townsend Community School, which is sponsored by Margaretta Local School District. Accordingly, Margaretta has joined in this testimony. Thank you for this opportunity to address these important issues facing Ohio community schools and community school sponsors.

Townsend Community School is a dropout prevention and recovery community school located in Castalia, Ohio. Since its founding in 2011, our School has sought to address the many obstacles facing our students—obstacles that include incarceration, parenthood, behavioral and learning disabilities, parental neglect and abuse, bullying, as well as other significant issues. TCS offers an educational platform specifically designed to promote engagement of our at-risk students by offering a personalized program through which the students control their schedules and intensity of their learning while developing close relationships with instructors via one-on-one and small group instruction. As exhibited by our report cards and graduation rates, we have made significant strides in addressing the needs of our at-risk students since opening our doors.

Much of our success is a product of our relationship with our sponsor, Margaretta Local School District. Townsend and Margaretta rely upon each other's expertise throughout the school year to help achieve our goals. This benefits our students and promotes significant efficiency in our programs. It is because of the success of this relationship that TCS supports the proposed amendments to the sponsor evaluation framework in House Bill 49.

Over the past two years, we have been dismayed at the overly burdensome requirements placed upon Margaretta as part of the sponsor evaluation process. Although, we agree that all schools and sponsors must be held accountable for their educational performance and compliance, it has been our observation that the overall sponsorship evaluation process far exceeds these relevant policy concerns to the point of wastefulness. Under the existing sponsor evaluation framework, sponsors like Margaretta are tasked with gathering and uploading hundreds of pages of compliance documents, many of which are duplicitous or have previously been provided to the Department for review. Even the slightest administrative or ministerial imprecision in reporting these compliance items to the Department is likely to result in reduced component scores and negatively impact a sponsor's overall evaluation rating. As a result, both Townsend and its sponsor have been forced to dedicate critical staff and financial resources towards preparing for evaluations. Unfortunately, this has the potential to distract from our ultimate mission of educating our students.

Pursuant to House Bill 49 as written, prior to its publication of the final sponsor evaluation rating scores, the Ohio Department of Education would be required to notify each sponsor of its preliminary sponsor rating and of the Department's determinations about each evaluation component that factored into that preliminary rating. The Bill would further offer sponsors an informal hearing with the Department to dispute any inaccuracies or misinterpretations found in these preliminary scores before final decisions were made about sponsor evaluation ratings and component calculations. We support this proposed change and believe that this is a necessary step towards promoting greater accuracy in the sponsor evaluation process. By allowing sponsors to explain, correct or contest information provided to ODE and the Department's interpretations, the legislature both insures that publicly released sponsor ratings truly reflect the sponsor's performance and enables sponsors to better fulfill their statutory purpose of providing community schools with monitoring, oversight and technical assistance. Many sponsors also support an appeal process.

We also applaud the General Assembly's efforts to clarify the relative weighting of each sponsor evaluation component as it factors into a sponsor's overall evaluation rating. In prior years, the Department implemented two "business rules" to calculate the overall ratings of sponsors. Based on these business rules, ODE weighted all categories equally as required by law *unless* a sponsor received 0 points in any evaluation component, in which case that category—or categories—were given decidedly more weight. The result of this was to skew sponsor evaluation ratings downwards. We note that the Bill maintains some vestige of these business rules in that any sponsor who receives a 0 score on the academic performance components would be subject to a decrease in its overall rating. The General Assembly might also consider the effect that automatic rating based upon academic performance would have on sponsors with only a few schools—like Margaretta, which only sponsors TCS—versus the effect academic performance would have on a sponsor with many schools. It is likely that this proposal, if it were to become effective, would disproportionately disfavor these smaller sponsors. Additionally, a larger school of disproportionate enrollment size may also effect a sponsor's rating, because the academic performance component

considers the enrollment size of each sponsored school. Might a better approach to the impact of the academic component on the overall rating be to count the academic performance grade by each school rather than per capita, given that the sponsor is not the actual teacher of each student?

We understand the need for accountability and the importance of each evaluation component; however, as a result of the Department's business rules, numerous sponsors received significantly lower evaluation ratings than their summative scores merited. This created confusion amongst sponsors, schools and the general public about the success of each sponsor and offered little insight as to where a sponsor needed improvement. Unfortunately, the sponsor evaluations are more centered around a school's performance than the sponsor's, as if the sponsor was the day-to-day administrator or teacher. We therefore support the proposal in House Bill 49 to simplify how each of these components will be weighted when calculating a sponsor's overall rating. However, rather than issuing an automatic designation on the basis of one component score, we encourage the General Assembly to (a) develop an evaluation scheme that would truly weight each component equally as originally intended, and (b) realize that a sponsor is not the day-to-day educator for the schools that it sponsors.

We note that practically speaking, the 2016-2017 sponsor evaluation procedures have not been without their difficulties. Schools and sponsors were not provided necessary resources for the 2016-2017 sponsor evaluations until February of this year—well into the academic year. As a result, it has been necessary for Townsend Community School and its sponsor to devote additional time and resources into the sponsor evaluation process that could have otherwise been used to educate our at-risk student population, and just before testing season.

We are encouraged by the General Assembly's efforts to improve the sponsor evaluation process and believe the proposed changes will help to promote our continued success with at-risk students to the benefit our community and the state as a whole. Thank you for your time and consideration regarding this important issue of vital importance to our state.