

Good afternoon, Chairman Jones, Vice Chair Manchester, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee. I appreciate this opportunity to testify in opposition to House Bill 322 and speak about the Resident Educator Program. My name is Laura Sluss, and I serve as a full-time mentor teacher at Newark City Schools. I attended Marietta College and earned a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education, a Master's Degree from The Ohio State University in Integrated Teaching and Learning and a Master's Degree from American College of Education in Educational Leadership. In 2009, while teaching first grade, I earned my National Board Certification.

When I started my teaching career at Newark, I was assigned a full-time mentor, which was invaluable. After eight years of teaching first grade at Newark City Schools, a mentoring position opened, and I knew I wanted to be part of the program to work with new teachers as they start their teaching journey.

I started mentoring during the first year of the Resident Educator (RE) Program in 2011, and I worked with other mentors at Newark City Schools to create an RE Program based on best practices. The Resident Educator Summative Assessment (RESA) established areas for focus. The RESA is not a standardized test or a bunch of paperwork to complete. It is a learning tool that measures teachers' abilities in seven domains. Each domain aligns with the Ohio Standards for the Teaching Profession. The RE program supports new teacher growth in every teaching standard and domain, giving teachers the honed skills to teach and pass the RESA. Since the RESA began in 2013-2014, every Newark City Schools teacher has passed in the allotted time frame. In their preparation and completion of the RESA, teachers practiced the priceless tool of reflection.

Reflection drives the program.

Reflection improves skills.

Full-time mentors maximize reflection. Mentors instruct by digitally recording lessons, teaching reflective questions, and collaborating with cohorts of new teachers to improve in all teaching domains. Despite previous testimony, none of these domains are “hoops” to jump through, and it is not “a slap in the face” to ask teachers to demonstrate the domains. Instead, the domains are rooted in best practices aligned with the Ohio Standards for the Teaching Profession. Each student in Ohio deserves a teacher who has mastery of every domain.

If the purpose of eliminating the RE program is to allow for more local control, substitute House Bill 322 fails its purpose. The proposed bill will destroy the mentoring program that Newark City Schools and other districts across the state have spent almost a decade creating by fundamentally changing how mentoring programs are led and who qualifies to be a mentor.

First, the bill states that Local Professional Development Committees (LPDCs) would create mentoring programs. That is not the role or the purpose of the LPDCs. Designing a quality mentoring program takes a significant amount of time, and the process should include educators who have experience mentoring teachers. Newark’s mentoring program was created and is led by a program coordinator and two full-time mentor teachers. Currently, the state provides a lot of flexibility, so districts can structure their programs for their individualized needs. Mandating LPDCs to create and oversee mentoring programs will force mass restructuring thus limiting districts’ control.

Further, the bill disqualifies dedicated full-time mentors because we do not meet the new criteria requiring every mentor be assigned to provide classroom instruction. For example, while I no longer teach in a “classroom” setting, my fellow mentors and I teach every day. We teach new teachers during new teacher induction. We teach and lead new teachers during monthly professional development seminars. We teach and lead weekly classroom observations and conferences. We teach in new teacher classrooms by modeling best practices. We teach teachers every day. However, this bill disqualifies that teaching experience from meeting the mentor teacher requirements. This undermines

the teaching profession. Having a classroom assignment does not make us more or less of a teacher. We are teachers. We are mentors. We are mentor teachers. The freedom to be a full-time mentor allows us the ability to take time to individualize RE programs to meet every teacher's needs.

Newark's RE program success is built on being led by full-time mentors. While other RE programs are also successful, we have invested personnel, resources, and time to make our program exceptional. Sadly, this bill would destroy many other successful RE programs, including those led by mentors who are retired classroom teachers since they do not meet the bill's criteria.

One misconception is that only high-income districts can afford to hire full-time mentors and create quality RE programs. For Newark, the median income of our residents is ranked 549 out of Ohio's 612 districts. By hiring full-time mentors, our district is able to increase our teacher retention rate, which provides enormous cost savings.

This bill will deny Ohio students from receiving instruction from teachers that were mentored by the current high-quality Resident Educator mentoring program. There will be an impact, a permanent impact, a negative impact. Ohio's children deserve the best-prepared teachers we can provide, especially during this time of crisis. This bill fails that goal.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

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