



**Testimony of Stephen Dyer
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SB 320**

Chairwoman Lehner, Vice Chairman Brenner and Ranking Member Fedor, I want to thank you for the opportunity to discuss SB 320.

Senate Bill 320 is pretty simple for me: It allows for Open Season for COVID-19 in our schools. It would not allow anyone to keep schools from re-opening – even if it’s clear that a school’s re-opening procedure will lead to COVID infections and deaths.

While I admire the bill sponsor’s sudden interest in local control over standards – something I wish he apply to the disastrous EdChoice debacle he has championed for years – the fact remains that if this bill passes in its current form, people who otherwise would *not* have died, will.

You may be OK with that. Communities around the state may be OK with that. Believe me, as a parent with two school-aged kids, I want more than anything for them to return to school as if COVID never happened.

However, I also am aware that if COVID spreads through our communities, it will kill members of our community. And as someone who has already lost someone they cared for to COVID, I would implore all of you to at least give pause to this bill.

For 30 years now, Ohio and American education policy has coalesced around the idea that there should be some sort of minimum knowledge standard every student should acquire in each grade. In fact, we test constantly to make sure these things are known.

If we’re willing to force districts to teach Greek Mythology, why in God’s name don’t we force them to have a minimum standard of safety prior to opening? Are we really willing to leave it up to school boards? I mean what an awful position that puts them in. There are probably zero epidemiologists on local school boards – maybe a handful around the state, but certainly not enough to inform all districts’ decisions with expertise.

And I don’t doubt for a second that school boards and administrators will do everything they can to ensure the safe re-opening of our schools. But in this hyper-political environment that has made the simple wearing of a mask a symbol of “cowardice” or “weakness” or some sort of un-American, communist, socialist, dictatorial obeisance, how do we ensure that everyone will be safe?



I get that parents can pull out kids and homeschool them under this bill if they're not comfortable with the situation. But then you're forcing parents to choose – in many cases – between going to work or teaching their kids, who now may fall behind because parents generally are not trained teachers.

I know, for example, that I could never teach my son the calculus he is now learning.

Again, this is unfair.

I get that a faction of our state wants to neuter the Ohio Department of Health. But during a pandemic with a deadly disease, don't you want to listen to doctors, not Facebook and Twitter trolls?

I also get that COVID may be ravaging certain areas of the state and not others. However, making some areas wide open and others more closed is also concerning to me.

Why?

Roads.

I have attached an Ohio road map for everyone to reference. As you can see, travel throughout the state is pretty simple and easy.





So, for example, let's say districts in Portage County – with only 358 cases – decide to open up like normal. Yet districts in Summit County – with more than 1,700 cases – decide to go to a more hybrid format or stay home and go online.

I can tell you that folks in Portage County come to Summit County to shop, eat and play. And some will get COVID because they'll shop in Montrose or Chapel Hill. Then they'll bring the disease back to Portage County. And their kids will bring it to school and spread the disease to other kids. Who will bring it home to their parents and/or grandparents.

And now there's a spike in Portage County.

Likewise, when students return to Kent State University, there may be a spike at the school. And those students can spread it in Portage County (because many live in Kent and surrounding communities in the county). Only now it gets turbo charged in the schools.

Please. Learn from Florida and Arizona. Failing to use science to inform the systematic return to normalcy leads to disaster. We need the Department of Health to be able to intervene. So when there's a spike somewhere, they can step in and protect our state and communities.

Ohio has been a national leader on its generally smart, scientifically informed approach to this crisis. No one wants kids back to normal school as much as I do. But without the backstop of ODH being able to step in and protect our state during a spike somewhere, you are courting disaster.

And people will die who didn't have to.

I'm not saying there shouldn't be a differentiated opening schedule depending on how COVID is affecting different communities. What I *am* saying is **health experts, not politicians** should determine the minimum standard for what constitutes a *safe* re-opening. It shouldn't be left up to local boards and administrators whose expertise may be limited.

For ultimately, this is the only real decision in this entire crisis: **At what point is the level of death acceptable to excuse not doing all you can to protect people?**

You need to look in your souls and hearts to make that decision. I don't envy it. But protecting citizens is your No. 1 job. I would urge that you fall on the side of caution over exuberance.



At least allow ODH to protect our state from a Florida-like case explosion if it appears imminent. And have ODH draw up minimum opening standards so when students return to school, parents can be assured that schools are at least adhering to the best, scientifically informed procedures currently available to keep our kids and communities safe.

I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.