

Senate Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education
Amended Substitute House Bill 166 Opposition Testimony
Licking Heights Local School District
May 16, 2019

Chairman Terhar, Vice Chair Lehner, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Finance Subcommittee for Primary and Secondary Education. My name is Philip Wagner, and I am the Superintendent of Licking Heights Local School District. With me is the Licking Heights Treasurer, Mr. Todd Griffith. We are here today to testify in opposition to House Bill 166 as it stands today.

At the start of this school year, I walked into Mrs. Stirn's Kindergarten classroom at South Elementary School along with 28 Kindergarteners rushing to find their seats. Mrs. Stirn is joined by Mrs. Cermak, Mrs. McEwen and Mrs. Perler, each of whom have 28 kindergartens in their classrooms this year. The rest of our kindergarten teachers at South Elementary are in a similar position with 26 to 27 students in their respective classes; however, we cannot afford to hire educational aides to help offset the student to adult ratio in our kindergarten classrooms. In fact, our entire school district is experiencing high student to teacher ratios and the problem culminates at our high school with class sizes often above 30 students.

To provide more context for our school district, we are fast growing with a current enrollment of nearly 4,600 students. This is my eighth year as superintendent and during this time student enrollment has grown from 3,300 students to 4,600. In addition to our fast growing enrollment, our school district is diverse in many ways, including:

- 40.01% of our students are on the free and reduced lunch program.
- 12.9% of our students are ELL and 16 languages are spoken in the school district
- 54% White, 28% Black, 7% Asian, 5% Hispanic, 7% Multiracial
- Licking Heights' State Share Index is 56%
- Enrollment has grown by 330% over the last 20 years.

Licking Heights has been strangled by the state funding gain cap for many years. Through the years we have tried to help the school district with less reliance on state aid. In many respects, changes to the employee insurance plans and the stimulation of community economic development have helped, but such efforts are not large enough to surmount the impact of the gain cap with such a fast-growing school district.

In fact, this year alone, the gain cap cost our community and students 12 million dollars. Licking Heights receives less than 50% of what the state funding formula calculates. We have the highest property tax rates in Licking County and much of that is due to the fact that we are building our 4th new school building in 17 years which amounts to over 100 million dollars in debt we still have to service. Over the last 6 years we have lost 50 Million Dollars due to the state funding gain cap.

We are one of the fastest growing districts in the State of Ohio and it will continue to grow rapidly. In fact, current projections for 2029 show our school district conservatively will have over 6,000 students. It is hard to fathom such rapid growth as we approach astronomical deficits. If we just simply don't hire more staff, Mrs. Stirn will have 30 plus kids in her room and we are

nearing the fire code capacity. Unfortunately, simply not hiring does not balance our budget. Because of the gain cap, we will need to make deep cuts to our budget. In Ohio, every student should have the opportunity of a high-quality education. Without state funding reform, our state government, has failed its children including the 28 students in Mrs. Stirn's class.

During the last budget cycle the Senate recognized that high growth districts were not receiving additional state aid to service the growing student populations and allowed for some modest growth in state funding. We have submitted a proposal to our state Senator, Majority Whip Senator Jay Hottinger, for inclusion in HB 166. The proposal provides some relief to growing districts across the state that have been impacted by the state gain cap. The relief comes at a minimal cost to the state budget. We hope that you will accept the amendment proposed by Senator Hottinger.

This concludes our testimony and we would be happy to address your questions. Thank you for your time and attention.

Philip H. Wagner, Ph.D.
Superintendent

Todd Griffith
Treasurer