

Ohio House Primary and Secondary Education Committee
House Bill 529 – Proponent Testimony
Tuesday, May 24, 2022

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Bird, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present proponent testimony on House Bill 529. My name is Amy Kissinger. I have spent the majority of my adult life working for county government. I am serving in my 7th year as an elected school board member in Ohio. I am the mother of two children, one who has graduated from high school and one who just finished 5th grade.

I am here today to express my support for House Bill 529, requiring online posting of school curricula and other related information as defined in the bill.

As an elected school board member, I watched a multitude of school board meetings over the past couple years and found the lack of reception of parents and community members to be heartbreaking. Board members across the country and in Ohio conducted these meetings with strict adherence to their policies, often avoiding eye contact with parents, or staring emotionless, if not angrily at those who had the audacity to expect that their elected representatives would be willing to receive their concerns about their precious children.

For anyone still holding to the notion that parent engagement at board meetings was anything beyond appropriate in MOST cases, you should know that the NSBA has completely renounced their actions that led to the ill-founded debacle of the Whitehouse weaponizing the FBI on parents. They now contend that “The letter directly contradicts our core commitments to parent engagement, local control and nonpartisanship.”

In my role at that time as the President of the Southeast Region of OSBA, I used every opportunity to implore my fellow board members to choose to embrace the engagement, instead of stonewalling it. In my experience as a board member, and even as an employee of OEA many years ago, very rarely in my life has a conversation concerning public education occurred without some derogatory mention of the apathy of parents. Were the parents sometimes angry and vocally confrontational? Absolutely. And yet, here was the engagement for which we had been waiting all this time.

In 2007, the State Board of Education of Ohio approved a “Parent and Family Involvement Policy.” It states, in part, “The State Board of Education of Ohio recognizes parents and families as children’s first and most important teachers. When parents enroll their children in school, from preschool through high school, the responsibility of education and care is shared with the school and the community. Partnerships among families, schools and communities that are child-centered and family-strengthening can engage, guide and motivate students to be productive citizens in a global society.” This policy was created as a requirement of Ohio Senate Bill 311 (ORC 3313.472).

The State Board of Education also directed the Ohio Department of Education to develop a bi-annual outcomes-driven plan, including a strategy to leverage existing resources and to develop a measure for family involvement.

From local school district policies all the way to the US Code, you can find discussion concerning the importance of parent and family engagement.

When parents are involved with their child’s education, it is reflected positively in their academic performance and attendance. And yet, public education is a bureaucratic system, and replete with barriers to parent involvement. So much so, that we see legislative attempts such as that in 2007 to force the partnership. If it had worked, if the local policies and federal code worked, not only would HB529 not be necessary today, but it would certainly not be a heavy lift.

Could it be that the version of parental involvement that we currently have is the lip-service variety? When we say “parental engagement” are we saying you can come to a parent teacher conference, or sell hotdogs in the concession stand at the football game on Friday night, but we aren’t really not interested in any real input from a parent? Please come to school on a random evening and enjoy a manufactured family night, and make this craft out of popsicle sticks. Then we can check the box that says, “parental engagement.” Heaven forbid a parent would raise concerns about ineffective administrative policies or substandard teaching. That isn’t parent engagement, but rather, a “gotcha moment.”

Surmising from my own experiences as a parent, and having conferred with hundreds of parents from all across the state the past couple years, for too many of us, it sounds like lip service.

We rely on parents to be unquestioning and passive. We are continually reminded by education professionals that only they can truly improve student learning. The rights and abilities of parents to participate in decision making are often discounted or even ignored.

We can scarcely talk about academic outcomes for students for all of the discussion surrounded the traumatization of children. We are establishing health clinics on-site at public schools in Ohio. We are collaborating with social service agencies and mental health agencies, all of whom enjoy a access to and liberty within our buildings. Coming in exactly dead last in the category of engagement with our schools, are parents. We agree about the importance of parent engagement. We all know the studies and statistics about how it impacts student outcomes. We are providing wrap around services to attempt to remediate the trauma that we contend is experienced in the family-life of the child. We spend millions upon millions on these wrap around services, and yet here we are, debating whether to allow parents a more convenient access to their child's curriculum.

Being the parent of a school-aged child and diligently monitoring his assignments, I know firsthand how difficult it is to be an engaged partner in his schooling. Requesting additional information about various lessons was always time consuming. Arranging schedules for meetings for discussion would often be a challenge, and by the time the conversation could occur, the lesson was long since concluded. The proactive approach of HB 529 makes much more sense. The longer we attempt to shield public education from this transparency and accountability, the longer it is going to take for us to arrive at our needed solutions together, and the longer it is going to take us to improve student outcomes.

Trust and respect between families and public education has frayed over the past couple years. HB529 can be a meaningful way to place our schools into the disinfecting and healing light of the sun where trust can be restored.

So I ask you today, when you say "parent engagement," do you really intend to treat parents as respected partners in their children's education, or are we going to just keep playing school?