

HB 11 Testimony- 3/14/23

Chairman Bird, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, and Ranking Member Robinson and members of the committee,

My name is Ben Porter and I am here before you today to share a unique perspective on this bill. I am a husband to a former kindergarten teacher and father of 4 children ages 9 and under, I am a third generation educator- my grandmother started teaching in a one room schoolhouse, my grandfather was a superintendent for 20 years, my parents are both retired public school teachers and I have been in education for the last 15 years as a teacher, principal, district leader, and consultant. I, like those in my family before me, believe in the power of education and the impact it has on our children and the future of our great state and country. I have had a front row seat to the current state of education and I am going to share with you my insights as an educator, father, and follower of Christ.

As I thought about how to describe the current state of education I could not find any other way to describe it than a War Zone that has unintentionally put our children in the crosshairs. Public education has become a political forum and created an environment that is difficult for all of those involved. You have boards of education in chaos causing a 49% turnover rate of superintendents since March of 2020. You have school leaders who have to navigate legislation like new title IV requirements and transgender restroom requirements while working through one of the worse staffing shortages ever- they are not trying to find the best candidate they are just trying to find a candidate- especially in rural areas. You also have teachers trying to navigate 2 years of COVID learning loss while trying to manage an increase in student behavior issues. It is no wonder the latest Gallup poll found k-12 education to be the leading industry for employee burnout at 44%- 9% higher than any other industry. And unfortunately there is no end in sight for many of these struggles- political divisiveness continues, teacher prep program completion rates in Ohio are down 36% over the last 15 years, and legal requirements continue to tie the hands of public school districts. And those paying the price for all of this are the children of this great state.

With all of that being said much progress has been made in some areas thanks to committees like yours in collaboration with many of my colleagues across the state. Career readiness and workforce development along with improved reading instruction are now on the forefront of priorities. And one of the most significant areas of progress was passed with the Fair School Funding Act- the first significant step forward in solving the madness of school funding in over 20 years.

So why is this bill so important? This bill enhances and continues the progress being made in our state. It enhances and builds on the new funding model to truly allow Ohio to fund the education for ALL of it's youth without cutting funding for public school districts. It is a straightforward, common sense approach that provides options for families and children who are caught in the chaos of public education and want or need other options for their education.

You have families of students with disabilities that are entitled to a Free and Appropriate Public Education through federal legislation but the only way many rural and small schools can address these needs are to bus students for hours a day to facilities in larger communities. Most of these families choose to home school their students and take on the financial burden of that decision- this bill provides funding to support these families in those efforts.

You have families of children who may not be able to succeed in a public school setting but flourish in a smaller or different environment. This bill provides funding to families so their child can find the right fit for them.

And then you also have families like mine who for years never considered any other options outside of public education but the unfortunate state of things that I mentioned earlier have changed our outlook. As a father and a Christian, I do not believe my children should be at risk of having to use the bathroom of a child of a different biological gender or that they should be at risk of bringing books home or taking part in lessons that run counter to their beliefs. Unfortunately, that is what is happening- as a district leader I have had to talk with attorneys about how do we navigate transgender students and sharing hotel accommodations on field trips and how do we handle bathrooms for these students on a daily basis. And I am here to tell you they don't even have the answers- districts are at risk of litigation and issues no matter what stance they take. I have also been at the table at the local and state level for discussions on library books and lessons about LGBTQ awareness and I am one of the few people at the table who willingly questions how these lessons and books are aligned with state standards and to put it bluntly- they aren't- and why would public schools even venture into these conversations with students when these beliefs run counter to what the 3 largest religious denominations in our country believe. So for the growing number of families like mine who want other options for their children other than sending them into this environment this bill provides an equitable opportunity for all families to have a choice.

If my grandfather who was a superintendent for 2 decades could see the state of things right now in education he would be appalled. I truly hope the tide turns in public education and that we can figure out solutions to the many problems that are plaguing us nationwide. In the meantime though our children in Ohio should have a choice as to whether or not they want to be a part of it. Families should have options as to where and how their children are educated. They should be able to have the opportunity to feel comfortable about the environment their child is going into each day and the knowledge and lessons that are being taught to them. I appeal to you this evening as parents, leaders, and fellow Ohioans to pass HB 11 and ensure families get this opportunity. Thank you and I will take questions you may have at this time.