



Interested Party Testimony House Bill 33
House Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education
March 22, 2023

Chairwoman Richardson, Ranking Member Isaacsohn, and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on HB 33. My name is Robin Fisher, and I serve as the President of the Ohio Alliance of Independent STEM Schools (OAISS). I am here today to urge the General Assembly to grant access to independent STEM schools to the Quality Community Schools Support Fund, increase the line item by \$10 million a year, and create a fourth set of criteria based on the unique education and requirements of our schools.

OAISS represents Ohio's network of seven public independent STEM schools, and the organization's mission is to promote the growth and sustainability of these schools to meet the state's workforce demands. For those who are not familiar with independent STEM schools, members of the 127th General Assembly authorized the creation of public independent STEM schools via provision of the biennium budget. The language intentionally created a new classification of schools- neither traditional public or charter school- to focus and support the economic development of the state with an emphasis on project-based learning steeped in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). We work closely with businesses and institutes of higher education to ensure we are preparing students for success in the future. Across our network of 7 schools we have more than 750 partners.

Our schools were created, in part, to be research and development labs for education in Ohio, and to be incubators of STEM talent across the state to meet Ohio's evolving workforce demand. We have embraced this challenge, and are Ohio's pre-eminent STEM trailblazers. We set the bar for STEM education in the state, and serve as the STEM talent pipeline.

As our name implies, independent STEM schools are not tied to a district, allowing us to accept any Ohio student, and be more flexible. But, as independent STEM schools, we educate our students exclusively on state and federal dollars that follow the student and are unable to levy taxes. Current funding for Ohio's independent STEM schools does not account for the unique mission and related costs of providing personalized project based learning and robust career exploratory programs. The initial provision authorizing the creation of public independent STEM schools mandated program requirements, but also included a STEM school grant. In 2010 the grant was discontinued, but the program requirements remain and the and the associated costs continue to escalate.

As mentioned above, our schools collaborate with local businesses, governments and academic institutes to ensure our curriculum is meeting the needs of today's workforce. Focusing on skill-mastery and problem-based learning, we prepare students for the industries of the future. Our successes are

evident by our nearly 100 percent graduation rate, the high rate of students that pursue STEM post-graduation- between 60-70 percent. The fact that our demand far exceeds our capacity, the number of educators, businesses and elected officials across Ohio and the country that are interested in learning how to replicate our programs, and the testimonies of students, parents and alumni of our schools. We take an innovative approach to education and are happy to share best practices and training to educators across the state and nation. We want to see all students succeed, and our impact reaches far beyond the more than 3,900 students attending our schools.

Independent STEM schools, by designation, emphasize personalized learning, real-life experiences and exposure to the workforce and emerging careers. Schools provide pathways in a variety of innovative fields, for example engineering, health, agriculture and more. Each classroom is essentially a lab, and our teachers have deepened knowledge and experience in these areas. To ensure our teachers are qualified and we remain innovative, our staff is required to participate in extensive professional development. Our robust career exploratory programs also require us to provide students with equipment and technology that will prepare them for the jobs of tomorrow. The fundamental requirements independent STEM schools must meet to achieve designation/redesignation are high and stand as proof that the students we are serving are receiving a high quality education.

Unfortunately, the state's funding has not matched our successes or mission. Since our inception, independent STEM schools have had the lowest per pupil expenditure of any educational model including the traditional public, career tech, community/charter schools. The average per pupil expenditure of \$14,687 in traditional public school, while the average community school received \$12,318 per pupil. While we have been tasked with preparing students for the emerging workforce, independent STEM schools received an average expenditure of only \$8,991 per student, compared to the average expenditure for Joint Vocational School District's \$17,201.

Over the years, we have utilized every process at our disposal to increase our school funding and lower our costs. We have leveraged community partnerships and have built our curriculum and programs in order to qualify for weighted funding through career technical education. We have done all of this while protecting and preserving the independent STEM educational model, steeped in project-based learning, that has been instrumental to our success. Regardless of how fiscally conservative we operate, our schools are facing fiscal cliffs. Granting our schools access to the Quality Schools Support Fund would provide sustainable funding to ensure we can continue to fulfill the mission and vision that inspired our creation.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. Access to this funding is critical to the future of our schools. I am happy to answer any questions.