

OAISS

Ohio Alliance of  
Independent STEM Schools



**Proponent Testimony House Bill 33**  
**Senate Education Committee**  
**May 2, 2023**

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chairman O'Brien, and Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Substitute HB 33. My name is Josh Jennings, I am the founding director and superintendent of Global Impact STEM Academy, an independent STEM school in Springfield, and a board member of the Ohio Alliance of Independent STEM Schools (OAISS). I am here today to testify on behalf of OAISS in support of the Quality Community and Independent STEM Schools Support fund as passed by the House. We applaud the House acknowledging the high quality education our schools are providing Ohio students and amending the fund to grant access to independent STEM schools, increasing the line item by \$10 million a year, and creating a fourth set of criteria based on the unique education and requirements of our schools. We ask the Senate to support the fund as passed by the House.

As background, 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 127<sup>th</sup> 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. This allows us to accept any Ohio student, which we do on a "first come, first served" or lottery basis. As independent schools, we are also able to be more flexible and quickly adjust to the needs of the workforce and students. It also; however, means 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 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 and 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 preparing them for the jobs of tomorrow. The fundamental requirements independent STEM schools must meet to achieve designation/redesignation are high and stand as proof the students we are serving are receiving a high quality education.

Unfortunately, the state's funding has not matched our successes or mission, and we are at a critical crossroads. The Quality Community and Independent STEM Schools Support fund will provide our schools with the needed sustainable funding to ensure we can continue to fulfill the mission and vision that inspired our creation, and help us serve more students. 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 is \$14,687 in a traditional public school, while the average community school receives \$12,318 per pupil. 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 \$17,20.

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. This fund will ensure we can continue to fulfill our mission and reach more students.

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