

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Obrien, Ranking Minority Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on House Bill 33, the fiscal year 24-25 biennial state operating budget. My name is Dave Larson, and I am the superintendent for the Miami County Educational Service Center and current president of the Ohio ESC Association. I am here to ask for support of an amendment to H.B. 33 that would update educational service center (ESC) funding consistent with all other K-12 educational entities. The requested amendment would benefit all educational service centers in Ohio and the districts, schools, and students they serve. ESCs have had significant growth over the last few years, and it is imperative to invest in maintaining the positive work they are conducting.

Educational service centers are terrific examples of coordinating and streamlining services that save taxpayers money and deliver cost-effective solutions that our districts need. ESCs are the central component of the Ohio Educational Regional Service System (ERSS) under Chapter 3312 of the Ohio Revised Code. In this role, ESCs support state and regional education initiatives and efforts to improve school effectiveness, and student achievement and carry out state programs.

The Miami County ESC provides special education services and programs to all nine of our client districts, which includes preschool through high school. Our programs serve 500 of the students with the most significant needs in Miami County. We coordinate business advisory councils (BACs) for eight of our school districts. We are required to carry out any activities charged to us by the General Assembly and or the Ohio Department of Education. Among those activities are new roles and responsibilities in partnership with the state of Ohio, including work associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. WE continued many of these services due to the benefits they provide to our districts. In addition, we used extended learning grant money to support learning acceleration, providing literacy support, and English Language Learner support for our districts. We employ family and communication engagement liaisons, and provide prevention education initiatives and threat assessment training (CSTAG). Every time we were asked to assist the state with a new and unique challenge, we stepped up and provided this support. That being said, we are spread very thin, and our current staff is limited on taking on more responsibility. Additional funding will allow our team to grow in order to continue the essential high-quality work for our districts and the state.

The roles and expectations of ESCs have increased significantly over the last few years. Many of these enhanced roles and responsibilities have occurred in the 2 years since the adoption of a new ESC funding model under HB 110 and have increased ESC-related operational expenses. To maintain this level of service and meet increasing demand, the operating subsidy needs to be addressed. This includes ensuring ESCs are positioned to carry out work in support of literacy initiatives and other key state-level priorities, including, importantly, those priorities identified in the 2-year budget. Our ESC has grown by about 50 employees over the last five years as a result of the increased demand from our districts and expectations in services by the state. These additional positions have created a greater need for administrative and support staff. Although our required staff has grown, our state funding has only marginally increased. Since ESCs do not have taxing authority, our increase programs are funded through our district contracts.

Increasing direct funding to ESCs will not just benefit students and staff, it will improve efficiency. Today, ESCs serve significantly more districts and students than in 2008. However, ESC State Operating Funds had been reduced by over 20% over that same time period. Additionally, ESCs lost facilities support and supervisory unit funding. When reductions in the state subsidy and elimination of unit funding are combined, overall funding to ESCs has been reduced by about 47% since 2008, prior to FY 2022 and HB 110 (134th GA).

Unfortunately, in H.B. 33, ESC funding (unlike funding for traditional public school districts and other entities) was not updated or enhanced over the original version of the budget and is not reflective of today's actual operating costs. Treating ESCs the same as traditional public schools could be accomplished by adopting the requested amendment. This would produce an \$8.9 million increase over the executive budget in FY 2024 and \$11.9 million above in FY 2025; this is \$20.8 million more over the biennium, which is consistent with increases for other entities. This increase, although it would have a huge impact on our ability to serve our client districts and students, is drastically less than the amount provided in increases to all other educational entities.

The Miami County ESC will use these additional funds to continue the expanded work we have been asked to provide with our extended learning funding. We will continue to support literacy initiatives, promote instructional improvement to all districts, not just those labeled "low performing," carry out more workforce development in partnerships with our districts and business communities, and career centers, support our districts in addressing the needs of students with significant academic, behavior, and emotional challenges, work with community partners to address the non-academic barriers to success and support preventative services through a model of multi-tiered systems of support.

Investing in ESCs is a responsible and effective way to improve the learning opportunities for all kids in Ohio. I ask you to make the recommended amendments to HB 33 and help us to continue this essential work.

Respectfully submitted,

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