

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram:

Good Morning, my name is Mark Neal and I am a local school superintendent in Muskingum County at Tri-Valley Local Schools. I am currently in my 19th year as an Ohio Superintendent. My fifth child will be graduating from Tri-Valley this spring. I have spent 31 years working in public education and most of them as a parent of public-school students.

I am here today because I do not like the direction we are headed. I have slowly watched the process of local districts losing their decision-making powers to State and Federal Mandates. While we have had a Republican controlled Senate and House for most of my career, the State has slowly usurped local power by mandating a centralized teacher evaluation system, social-emotional wellness programs, social inclusion training, suicide prevention, and mental health curriculum through "ODE Approved Vendors".

I don't have time to go into the specifics on all of these topics, but know this. My wife and I never sent any of my children to school with the expectation that somehow the school district was responsible for their mental well-being. We sent our children to school to learn Math, Science, and Reading. Most of the parents in my district feel the same way. They are not the least bit interested in the State Report Card ratings. They are tired of hearing about equity, race, and gender. They are interested in ACT, not PBIS.

The latest strategy for foisting these social programs on school districts is by mandating that they utilize "approved vendors" and "evidence based" programs that are completely filled with DEI and race-based content. School Districts are forced to participate and utilize these vendors whether they like it or not. I recently shared a video with Rep. Holmes that was required viewing in order for a school administrator to be certified to evaluate teachers. The lesson was on an author who had written several LBGTQIA novels for kids. School districts are now forced to use a statewide evaluation system that utilizes content that most of us would never allow in our own buildings.

With the onset of statewide vouchers, we are at the point of what many might call a great reset. In these private schools that now accept state money, there are no requirements for any of the programs listed above. There is no need for a HB 214, because their teachers can already speak freely. Their speech will likely reflect the expectations of the families who have enrolled their children. Their teachers will not be evaluated using a mandated ODE program developed by left wing groups in California. Let's do the same thing for public schools. Let's level the playing field.

Our school was the first in our region to announce we were coming back after COVID. In fact, we would have never closed for COVID if not mandated by the Governor. Throughout my career as a superintendent, I have repeatedly been put in the same situation of having to make decisions that are supported and reflective of my local community... or that comply with state and federal mandates. I have survived by always representing the beliefs and expectations of our community. Many of my colleagues have drank the ODE Kool-Aid and have not been as fortunate. It is time to get back to local control of Ohio's Schools. HB 214 is a good start.