House Education Committee, Ohio House of Representatives

Interested Party Testimony on House Bill 523

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Chair Fowler Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Brennan, and members of the House Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 523.

My name is Amanda Fontana, and I am submitting this testimony to address both the vital promise of the original bill and the deeply problematic changes introduced in the proposed substitute version.

The foundational framework of House Bill 523 offered a historic opportunity to stabilize Ohio's teacher pipeline. Student teaching is a full-time, rigorous professional commitment. By ensuring fair compensation, healthcare access, cost-of-living stipends, and test-fee reimbursements, the original bill addressed the severe financial barriers that force talented candidates out of the profession.

However, the substitute version is deeply problematic and unacceptable. The proposed substitute version strips away virtually all meaningful state-level support, replacing a robust workforce initiative with optional measures that fail Ohio's future educators. This new version is unacceptable for several key reasons. It removes the requirement to pay student teachers at least minimum wage, replacing it with an optional stipend left entirely to the discretion of individual, cash-strapped school districts. It eliminates healthcare access, public schools would no longer be permitted to offer healthcare to student teachers, leaving these full-time workers vulnerable and unprotected. It bans collective bargaining; it actively restricts student teachers from collectively bargaining with their employers unless the school specifically elects to permit it. It erases crucial financial aid; the substitute version completely removes state-funded cost-of-living stipends and test-fee reimbursements for student teachers facing severe financial need. It downgrades in-demand status; by removing the requirement to add teachers to the official ODJFS in-demand jobs list, the state fails to properly recognize and prioritize education as a critical economic sector. Instead, it creates a separate, weaker list that lacks the same workforce funding advantages.

Instead of investing in our future workforce, this substitute version passes the financial buck entirely to local school districts and universities while stripping student teachers of basic worker protections. Ohio cannot solve its teacher shortage by watering down a bill until it does nothing more than allow colleges to lower tuition if they choose to.

I urge this committee to reject these rollbacks and return to the meaningful, mandatory protections outlined in the original bill.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Amanda Fontana, MSW