

May 11, 2025

Dear Members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is Elizabeth Kirby, and I am the Cleveland Heights-University Heights School District Superintendent. I have served in this role for six years and am a proud native of Cleveland, Ohio. I have carefully reviewed the proposed legislation around SB96 and its potential impact on our daily operations, the work of our principals, teachers, and staff, and, most importantly, the educational outcomes for our students. I know that you share my commitment to ensuring all students in Ohio receive a high-quality education that prepares them for success in our state and nation.

I am writing to express my significant concerns regarding the school funding provisions of SB 96. The current funding appropriations would only give CHUH an additional \$700,000 instead of 6 million as outlined in the Fair School Funding plan. This change will have profound implications for our district. Class sizes will be affected, students will not receive the critical support they need to succeed, and the crucial support we provide to students around mental health, college readiness, and career readiness will be significantly reduced. Our families and community will be affected by this proposed cut. Further, the 30% cap will be another hit to our funding and our services to our students.

I am here with other members of the CHUH community, including the Board president, Malia Lewis, and students from our high school. While we consider the budget process in SB 96, I want to speak to our concerns about SB 113, a bill that we ask legislators to vote down and NOT include in the upcoming budget bill.

I will outline several critical challenges posed by specific components of this bill to ensure a thorough understanding of its potential impact on our stakeholders' daily lives.

The bill proposes banning any orientation or training course about diversity, equity, and inclusion, and prohibits these terms in job descriptions. This is problematic for many reasons, including the lack of clear definitions for these three terms. Without specific definitions, it would be difficult for school districts to determine which orientation or training courses would be prohibited. For instance, our teachers who work with students with disabilities require ongoing annual training to ensure the faithful implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and to provide the necessary support for these students to succeed in the classroom.

The concept of "diversity" could easily encompass training on effective strategies for engaging students with varied viewpoints, learning styles, and backgrounds.

This issue is further complicated with the language that "Replacing any orientation, training, office, or position designated for diversity, equity, and inclusion that is prohibited under the policy with an orientation, training, office, or position under a different designation that serves the same or similar purposes, or that uses the same or similar means." This is unclear and would make a district, principal, or teacher feel like they cannot engage in any training at all on any topic. For example, if attending a conference, would a teacher be able to attend a session titled, "Supporting math achievement for Black male students" or "Supporting girls in STEM fields"? What is meant by the same or similar purpose or means?

To further describe my concern with this bill, I want to share my understanding of diversity, equity and inclusion applied to schools. Diversity is the term applied to a school district that describes a school community that serves students from various ethnic, racial, socio-economic, ability, and sexual orientation groups. Equity means that no matter the situation, each student can get the support and resources needed to achieve their educational goals. Applied to a school district, equity in action would mean that a school would institute policies, procedures, and practices to ensure no barriers to success for any student based on their diverse background. Different students would get different support based on their different needs. An inclusive environment is a safe space for everyone to contribute and participate, and everyone's differences are viewed as an asset rather than a liability. Districts practice inclusion by effectively using equitable practices and creating welcoming environments for **all** students, staff, and families. Rather than banning practices and training around diversity, equity, and inclusion, these principles should be embraced as they were in the recent Ohio Department of Education and US Department of Education strategic plan.

Defined in this manner, diversity, equity, and inclusion directly address critical areas for student success, as highlighted in the Ohio School Report Cards. For example, the Gap Closing component of the report card sets specific targets for schools based on race, disability, and socioeconomic status in Math, English Language Arts, and the graduation rate. Additionally, the gifted component of the report card incentivizes schools in their scoring to demonstrate specific increases in identifying underrepresented students for gifted services. This legislation would prevent schools from engaging in work to show achievement in these areas on the Ohio Report Card, especially when coupled with no clear definitions of diversity, equity and inclusion in the bill.

To effectively support student performance in these areas, engaging in training that explores potential barriers to academic success and providing teachers with strategies to help these students is essential. Numerous aspects of the report card directly relate to ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have equitable access to the resources they need to succeed. How can we effectively address racial achievement gaps without implementing practices such as culturally responsive education, which aims to connect academic content to students' experiences and inspire high levels of achievement?

All school districts have a mechanism for parents and staff to share their concerns around training, curriculum, and initiatives. An additional enforcement mechanism for a vague policy would add further confusion and tension, ultimately hurting students. I strongly urge you to reconsider and abandon Senate Bill 113 so that we can remain focused on the diverse needs of all our students and to make our state a wonderful place to live, learn and grow.

Please continue to support all of Ohio's students and abandon this bill. I would be happy to speak with any of you by phone or in person to share more about my perspective and experiences in this critical area.

Wishing you well,

Elizabeth Kirby

Superintendent

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