

INDEPENDENCE LOCAL SCHOOLS

Kelli Cogan
Superintendent

Jennifer Knapp
Treasurer

7733 Stone Road
Independence, Ohio 44131
(216) 642-5850
Fax (216) 642-3482
www.independence.k12.oh.us

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Written Testimony for the Ohio Senate Education Committee (SB 144)

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of Senate Bill 144. My name is **Kelli Cogan**, and I serve as the Superintendent of Independence Local Schools. I also represent the Ohio Middle Level Association (OMLA) as a proud member and advocate for the thousands of educators across our state who work tirelessly to meet the academic and developmental needs of young adolescents.

As a superintendent, I can tell you that one of the most critical responsibilities of any school district is **hiring the right people**. The effectiveness of every program—academic, social, and extracurricular—rests on the quality and preparation of our educators. Strong hiring practices are the cornerstone of strong schools. Yet, for too long, Ohio’s licensure structure has made it unnecessarily difficult to identify and hire teachers who are both content-strong and developmentally attuned to the unique needs of middle-level learners.

Students in grades 4–9 are not just “in between” childhood and adolescence—they are in the midst of extraordinary physical, cognitive, and social development. As research by Steinberg and Icenogle (2020) reminds us, these years are when students explore identity, form values, and begin to think critically and independently. Teachers working with this age group need specialized preparation in adolescent development, classroom engagement, and relational learning—skills that are *not* automatically transferable from early childhood or high school licensure bands.

Senate Bill 144 addresses this gap. By establishing a **dedicated Grades 4–9 licensure band**, the bill ensures that we can recruit and hire educators who are purposefully trained for this critical stage. It replaces the narrow, subject-specific licensure model with a more flexible, generalist structure—allowing superintendents and principals to hire teachers who are both developmentally competent and instructionally adaptable.

This change is not just about flexibility—it’s about *fit*. As Beane and Bishop (2022) and McEwin and Smith (2023) demonstrate, states that maintain specialized middle-level licensure produce educators who implement adolescent-centered pedagogies, foster engagement, and improve both academic and behavioral outcomes. In my own district, we see this daily: when we hire teachers who understand

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Jennifer Knapp
Treasurer

Tom Dreiling
Assistant Superintendent

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Sandra McCullough
Director of Student Services

Francine Kane
Nutrition & Transportation Supervisor

middle-level learners—teachers who can balance structure and empathy, rigor and relevance—our students thrive.

Furthermore, research cited by Wolverton (2021) and the National Center for Education Statistics (2024) shows that educators with specialized preparation are more likely to stay in the profession. In an era of teacher shortages, this matters deeply. Hiring educators who feel competent and supported reduces turnover, enhances school culture, and ensures continuity for students who crave stability during their most formative years.

As a superintendent responsible for student outcomes and fiscal stewardship, I cannot overstate how valuable this legislation will be. Senate Bill 144 gives us the ability to **hire the right teacher for the right level**, ensuring that every young adolescent is taught by someone who understands not just *what* to teach but *how* to reach them.

On behalf of Independence Local Schools and the Ohio Middle Level Association, I urge your support for Senate Bill 144. It is a forward-thinking, research-based reform that strengthens our teacher pipeline, supports our hiring practices, and—most importantly—serves the needs of Ohio’s students in the critical middle years.

Thank you for your time and for your continued commitment to Ohio’s schools and communities.

Respectfully submitted,
Kelli Cogan
Superintendent, Independence Local Schools