



Senate Finance Committee
Interested Party Testimony | Substitute House Bill 96
June 6, 2025

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Sub HB 96 on behalf of the Ohio Alliance of Independent STEM Schools (OAISS). My name is Meka Pace, and I am the Superintendent of Metro Schools and a Board Member of OAISS. OAISS represents Ohio's network of public independent STEM schools, promoting their growth and sustainability to meet the state's workforce demands.

For background, independent STEM schools are public schools of choice that were created to focus and support the economic development of the state with an emphasis on project-based learning steeped in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). Our schools were created, in part, to be research and development labs for education in Ohio and serve as incubators of STEM talent to meet Ohio's evolving workforce needs. We have embraced this mission, setting the bar for STEM education in the state, and serving as the STEM talent pipeline.

As the state prioritizes workforce readiness and economic development, we remain committed to working closely with businesses and institutions of higher education to ensure we prepare students for future success and address the regional workforce needs. Across the eight independent STEM schools, we engage with over 750 community, business, and higher education partners; and continue to build new relationships. Students are regularly exposed to career opportunities, and engage with partners to explore the workforce in the region. Our schools are open to all students in Ohio, and admission is non-selective.

Our success is evident by our nearly 100 percent graduation rate, with 60-70 percent of our graduates pursuing STEM post-graduation. Our schools' value to the state is further shown by a demand that far exceeds our capacity, interest from educators, businesses and elected officials across Ohio and the country seeking to replicate our programs, and the positive testimonies from students, parents and alumni. We take an innovative approach to education and are committed to sharing best practices and training with educators across the state and nation. Our impact reaches far beyond the students enrolled in our schools.

As independent STEM schools, we rely solely on state and federal dollars that follow the student and are unable to levy taxes. As a result, our schools have categorically been the lowest funded public schools, and every dollar is important.

My testimony today will focus on changes to three specific funds important to our schools: the Equity Supplement, Quality Community and Independent STEM Schools Support Program, and Facilities Aid.

Access to the Equity Supplement:

While the foundation funding for our schools is calculated similarly to community schools, we have not always been granted the same supplemental funding that community schools have enjoyed, in spite of the fact that we face similar challenges. The equity supplement is an example. We were grateful that Governor DeWine and the House had extended this funding to independent STEM schools, and would respectfully urge the Senate to reinstate independent STEM schools' eligibility from the previous versions.

Quality Community and Independent STEM School Support Program:

The Quality Independent STEM School Support Program, established last General Assembly, has been crucial in enabling our schools to continue to fulfill their mission of providing personalized, project-based learning, and robust career exploratory programs. The fundamental requirements independent STEM schools must meet to achieve designation/redesignation are rigorous and stand as proof that the students we are serving are receiving a high quality education. By designation, we are required to emphasize personalized learning, real-life experiences and exposure to the workforce and emerging careers. Our schools provide pathways in a variety of fields- for example engineering, health, agriculture and more. As stated above, we work closely with businesses and institutes of higher education to ensure we prepare students for future success and address the regional workforce needs.

We are grateful that Sub HB 96 codifies and continues the Quality Community and Independent STEM School Support Program funding. Changes made in the Senate; however, could reduce the full impact of the fund if schools expand to offer more pathways and serve more students as requested by the community, by removing the provision in both the Executive and House versions that would allow the Director of DEW to request the Controlling Board authorize expenditures in excess of the amounts appropriated if the fund was insufficient. We respectfully ask that this be reinstated from previous versions.

Facilities Aid

We are thankful for the Senate's continued support of the facility aid for independent STEM schools. Although it is less than proposed in the Executive and House versions, we appreciate the increase from the current funding level.

We want all Ohio children to succeed, and remain committed to setting the bar for STEM education. Investing in independent STEM schools is an investment in Ohio's future workforce. Our foundation funding is calculated similar to community schools, but we have been removed from the equity supplement. We respectfully request the Senate to include independent STEM schools' eligibility to the equity supplement, and urge continued support of the Quality Community and Independent STEM School Support Program and Facilities Aid. This funding is essential to ensure we can continue to provide the innovative education that is responsive to the community and workforce demands of our regions and state. Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions at this time.