

Testimony for October 26th Hearing in the House by Senator Jerry C. Cirino Re: SB 135

Chair Lanese, Vice-Chair Young, Ranking Member Ingram and members of the House Higher Education and Career Readiness Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on SB 135, a bill that supports both higher education and career readiness.

As you know, I sit as Vice-Chair of the Senate Committee on Workforce and Higher Education, which held numerous hearings on this bill before referring it out of committee. On June 17th, the bill was brought to the Senate floor for a vote and passed in bipartisan fashion by a vote of 31-2.

In addition to the vote in the Senate, there were several components in SB 135 that were subsequently taken up in HB 110 and passed into law. These components included:

- The ability for qualifying community colleges to offer Bachelor of Science in Nursing degrees in order to address the severe nursing shortage that has affected our state in the past couple years. At this moment, several community colleges have already begun work to establish a BSN degree program through the Ohio department of higher education.
- Another component passed through HB 110 would not allow an institution of higher education to withhold a student's transcripts from potential employers when they are a prerequisite for employment.
- Finally, the second chance pilot program was established through HB 110, and is ready to accept applications through the Ohio Department of Higher Education next week. This program will provide a \$2000 grant to students who have stopped-out of their post-secondary program and who need financial assistance to re-enter and complete a qualified degree or credential program in Ohio. As of my office's most recent inquiry, over 120 schools have signed up to be offering institutions. While the funding mechanism and general structure was adopted into HB 110, we have left the rule making authority and qualifying provisions in SB 135 to make sure it is codified, should the program be successful and addressed again in the future.

An important aspect of SB 135 was its input from education stakeholders and other interested parties. Between the bill's introduction on March 17th and the Senate vote in June, I held over 70 meetings with interested parties, including:

- The Inter-University Council
- Numerous university presidents
- Several university trustees
- The Ohio Community College Association and all of Ohio's community college presidents
- Chancellor Randy Gardner and staff from the Ohio Department of Higher Education

These meetings consisted of robust discussions on virtually all sections of the bill. Throughout the process, I listened to their points, discussed concerns, and invited interested parties to submit corrective language. In many cases, the submitted language was incorporated in whole or in part into the Senate-passed version of this legislation. While there were still some disagreements, the input received was very helpful in crafting the bill you have before you.

The collaborative process behind SB 135 is vital because higher education is so important to our state, and for this legislation to fulfill its purpose you need input from as many stakeholders as possible. I wanted to make every effort to make SB 135 a piece of legislation that would make a difference for our students and families while providing tools to help institutions of higher education succeed.

In regards to the bill that is before you, please allow me to highlight some of the key components of SB 135:

- While the Senate intends to examine student debt in Ohio with hearings in the next couple of months, we wanted to address the issue by making certain that parents and students have early access to career and financial options to make decisions that might reduce the burden of student debt. This will be accomplished through better counseling and career advising policies at the high school/secondary level and better program options at all levels of the education system. With this legislation, students will begin to receive information in high school on all degree pathways, not just four-year degrees, and programs to help offset costs such as ROTC and guaranteed transfer pathways.
- With the cooperation of the Chancellor, SB 135 will also help us focus more on programs that support in-demand jobs. While we certainly are not suggesting that liberal arts education should be diminished, we want to ensure that our institutions are cognizant of the demands of our workforce and are offering programs to fulfill these needs for our businesses.
- Creates a sub-program of the College Credit Plus Program to add certified apprenticeship programs for eligible students.
- The establishment of the Ohio Guaranteed Transfer Pathways Initiative would uniformly permit community college students to transfer credits to state universities and require all state universities to have articulation agreements and/or dual enrollment programs with multiple community colleges. Many of our institutions have these programs but our intent is to make it more uniform throughout the state.
- Provides additional reporting requirements by the Chancellor and/or the institution regarding topics ranging from state share of instruction (SSI), cost of attendance, post-graduation statistics, mental health and wellness services, among other topics.
- Clarifies and corrects aspects of the relationship between institutional donors and the recipients. While I understand the interest regarding this section, the experts and witnesses from both sides of the issue will be able to provide a more helpful dialogue on this provision in upcoming hearings.
- Requires the adoption and communication of policies which will serve to protect the free speech rights of students and faculty. Our educational institutions must be beacons of free speech and free expression with reasonable limits. As many of us know, free speech is not an absolute right, and because of this, these policies must also protect students and faculty from 'compelled speech' as well. On this note, I would also like to make the committee aware that we are currently working to identify how to enhance the free speech section regarding K-12 schools, as we understand there is a large difference between those students and those attending our higher education institutions. We would be open to hearing suggestions from this committee on how to strengthen these provisions so every student feels as though their free speech is protected, regardless of age, belief, and location.

- In the case of violations of these policies, this bill aims to ensure that a student's due process rights are respected and that adjudication processes are fair and understood.

In closing, this committee will, no doubt, hear from interested parties regarding many aspects of this bill. Many of them testified before our committee in the Senate. I think it is important to hear from all parties in order to form a proper judgement. However, I hope you keep in mind that education and job training is vital to Ohioans' future prospects as well as our state's ever changing economy. Ohio has prided itself as a leader in higher education and innovation, and my aim behind SB 135 is to develop the tools and policies to favorably position our state and institutions of higher education in the future. While we know many of our institutions have programs or are doing some of these things, and well, it is important that all students receive the same standards, regardless of where they choose to pursue their education. At this point, I thank you for your time and consideration of SB 135, and am happy to take any questions from the members.