



**Interested Party Testimony House Bill 110**  
**Senate Finance Committee**  
**June 3, 2021**

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chairman Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on HB 110 regarding the funding of independent STEM schools. My name is Meka Pace, and I am the president of the Ohio Alliance of Independent STEM Schools (OAISS). OAISS represents Ohio's seven public independent STEM schools. I am here today to state our concerns that the funding for independent STEM schools included in the budget is unsustainable.

When members of the 127<sup>th</sup> General Assembly authorized the creation of public independent STEM schools in a provision of the biennium budget, Ohio Revised Code 3326, they tasked the schools with developing and using innovative and transformative instructional methods with an emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). Our schools were created, in part, to be research and development labs for education in Ohio, and to be incubators of STEM talent across the state to meet Ohio's evolving workforce demand. Independent STEM schools are preparing students to face the challenges of the future in the emerging professions that have not been created yet. OAISS schools have embraced that challenge, and are Ohio's pre-eminent STEM trailblazers.

The state's funding has not matched our successes or mission. Since our inception, independent STEM schools have had the lowest per pupil foundation funding of any educational model including the traditional public, career tech, community/charter schools. In fiscal year 2019, the average per pupil expenditure of \$12,473 in traditional public school, while the average community school received \$10,338 per pupil. Comparatively, independent STEM schools have received an average expenditure of only \$7,927 per student. The formula to create fair and more equitable funding for Ohio's students falls short in terms of funding Ohio's seven public independent STEM schools.

As our name implies, independent STEM schools are not tied to a district, allowing us to accept any Ohio student, and be more flexible. But, as independent STEM schools, we educate our students exclusively on state and federal dollars that follow the student and are unable to levy taxes. The school funding formal as included in the budget, does not provide sustainable funding for Ohio's independent STEM schools, and does not account for the unique mission and related costs when providing personalized project based learning and robust career exploratory programs. The initial provision authorizing the creation of public independent STEM schools mandated program requirements, but also included a STEM school grant. In 2010 the grant was discontinued, but the program requirements remain and the and the associated costs continue to escalate.

Our schools collaborate with local businesses, governments and academic institutes to ensure our curriculum is meeting the needs of today's workforce. Focusing on skill-mastery and problem-based learning, we prepare students for the industries of the future. Our successes are evident by our 100% graduation rate, the high rate of students that pursue STEM post-graduation, the fact that our demand far exceeds our capacity, the number of educators, businesses and elected officials across Ohio and the country that are interested in learning how to replicate our programs, and the testimonies of students, parents and alumni of our schools. We take an innovative approach to education and are happy to share best practices and training to educators across the state and nation. We want to see all students succeed.

Independent STEM schools, by designation, emphasize personalized learning and real-life experiences and exposure to the workforce and emerging careers. Schools provide pathways in a variety of innovative fields, for example engineering, health, agriculture and more. Each classroom is essentially a lab, and our teachers have deepened knowledge and experience in these areas. Our hands on and personalized approach, requires smaller classroom sizes than accounted for in the school funding formula. Additionally, to ensure our teachers are qualified and we remain innovative, we dedicate three times the amount of professional development days as accounted for in HB 110. Our robust career exploratory programs also require us to provide students with equipment and technology that will prepare them for the jobs of tomorrow. Our unique mission and the fundamental requirements of independent STEM schools should be funded differently than community and other schools. The proposed funding increase in this bill falls short of the additional funding per pupil that we need to remain sustainable, and to support our robust career exploratory programs designed to inspire and prepare future STEM professionals for the emerging workforce. To sustainably operate, we are requesting a \$750 increase in per-pupil foundation funding this year, with another \$750 requested for the next fiscal year.

Over the years, we have utilized every process at our disposal to increase our school funding and lower our costs. We have leveraged community partnerships and have built our curriculum and programs in order to qualify for weighted funding through career technical education. We have done all of this while protecting and preserving the independent STEM educational model, steeped in project-based learning, that has been instrumental to our success. Regardless of how fiscally conservative we operate, our schools are facing fiscal cliffs and the proposed in House Bill 110 is inadequate to allow us to continue to fulfill our mission as education incubators.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. We appreciate your leadership on addressing school funding. While we are grateful for the additional facilities funding in Sub HB 110, the extra \$500 per pupil for facilities does not alleviate our fiscal cliffs. We encourage the committee to amend HB 110 to increase funding for independent STEM schools to a sustainable level that will allow us to continue to fulfill our mission. Innovation will be key to rebuilding our economy after COVID-19. Independent STEM schools and our students will be an integral part of that solution.

Meka Pace

President  
Ohio Alliance of Independent STEM Schools