

Ohio House Finance Sub-Committee on Primary and Secondary Education
H.B. 33
Proponent Testimony
Anthony J. Calderone, Superintendent, LaBrae Local Schools
March 23, 2023

Chair Richardson, Ranking Member Isaacsohn, and esteemed members of the Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, my name is A.J. Calderone, Superintendent of LaBrae Local Schools, and I am grateful to the committee for the opportunity to offer my proponent testimony for H.B. 33.

In my 30 years as a public educator, which includes 18 as an administrator, I have never been more hopeful about the state of public school funding in Ohio. Monumental progress was made in the 134th General Assembly with the authorization and implementation of the Fair School Funding Plan. I am appreciative of all members of that General Assembly for their historical support to move Ohio toward a more thorough and efficient system of common schools. Despite this groundbreaking progress, I think we all can agree there is more work to be done, and this General Assembly will play just as a significant role as the last in ensuring Ohio's public schools are well funded and well resourced.

LaBrae Local Schools is a district that has a student economically disadvantaged rate of 52%. One mill of taxation in LaBrae generates roughly \$123,741 of revenue. All of our local revenue is generated on total operating millage of 47.3 mills against property valuation that ranks LaBrae 523rd out of 620 public schools in the state. Like many, we've seen our industrial tax base practically evaporate. It has been 32 years since LaBrae last requested new operating revenue from our community. Moreover, LaBrae Schools is the epitome of fiscal responsibility, having never been placed in fiscal emergency during its 53-year history. We are always mindful of balancing resources to the wants and needs of students. Suffice is to say that our ability to thrive is dependent upon prudent fiscal management. Thus, a local economic climate that is hopeful of a resurgence, and limited capacity to effectively raise local revenue, makes our District extremely dependent on Ohio's commitment to adequately fund public education.

I offer this narrative of our district to underscore the importance of the Fair School Funding

Plan, and most importantly, the need for this legislature to remain committed to enhancing and funding the Plan. Thus, I am requesting the legislature to be steadfast in increasing the general phase-in, and the phase-in of the disadvantaged pupil impact aid, to 50% in FY2024, and further increase the phase-in percentage to 66.7% in FY2025.

Furthermore, Ohio is in exceptional fiscal shape. We have the resources to significantly increase our investment in students. While I'm appreciative of Governor DeWine's commitment to the Fair School Funding Plan, I ask the legislature to pass a budget bill that updates the data used in the base cost input calculations from FY2018 levels to the readily available FY2022 data. Much has transpired in the last three years, and all private and public entities are facing inflationary pressures associated with the cost of doing business. Using antiquated data to determine the value of base cost inputs cannot be justified when Ohio has the resources to fund input levels that more accurately reflect the true cost of educating a typical child. Remaining on the scheduled phase-in for all of the core inputs will allow the formula to begin to operate more naturally post-COVID, and doing so, provides school district leaders with a trajectory that is predictable and facilitates effective planning.

One extremely important funding input that often times is lost on policy makers is the high cost of educating students with disabilities. Low incident/high cost special education expenses have been woefully underfunded for many years. It is important for Ohio to enhance the funding for special education, and special education transportation, so districts can adequately provide rewarding learning environments for disabled students. Special education funding has not kept pace with educational needs and associated costs, and districts need a greater commitment from Ohio to better meet the needs of our disabled learners.

I'm also appreciative of the Governor's initiatives to fund school resource officers, his objective to assist districts with literacy coaches, and his continued emphasis on student success and wellness. However, I am advocating for the General Assembly to incorporate the Governor's funding proposals for these areas into the base cost components that are already in place. Infusing the base cost components with these funding enhancements will allow LaBrae and other public schools to exercise local control in determining how to allocate resources to best meet the social emotional, security, and learning needs of our students.

Further, the bus purchasing program has been instrumental in helping Ohio districts offset the costs of purchasing new buses. The cost to purchase a new bus for LaBrae increased 10% from 2020 to 2022. Currently, the cost to purchase a new bus meets or exceeds \$100,000. Purchasing new buses can be cost prohibitive for many districts, and the continuation of a scalable purchasing assistance plan from the State is an imperative to ensure we are able to make the regular investment in our fleet.

Lastly, it would be remiss of me to testify before you and not address the issue of the proposals for a backpack scholarship program. At some point in the budget making process there will be an effort to incorporate H.B. 11 or S.B. 11 into H.B. 33, and I ask legislators to resist this effort. It is important for all Ohioans to remember that nearly 90% of school aged children attend public schools. Moving Ohio to a universal voucher system of funding, whether through direct payments to private and parochial schools, or through educational savings accounts, jeopardizes the ability to adequately make the aforementioned investments.

There are some who state the cost of a backpack scholarship program will not be as expensive as the price tag placed upon it by the Legislative Services Commission. Let recent voucher expansion in other states serve as a testament to the legislature. In Arizona, a state with a universal program, 80% of students on a voucher have never attended public schools. Similar scenarios are true in Wisconsin and New Hampshire. Do backpack sponsors really believe that the uptake rate will be as low as they project? That a majority of parents currently funding a private education are going to reject a voucher? An understanding of human nature tells us the uptake rate will be high and the cost significant. Funding a universal backpack program is not fiscally conservative, in fact, it would be a move that is fiscally irresponsible, and jeopardizes taxpayers, and our ability to make continued investments in public education.

In closing, I ask you to support strengthening the Fair School Funding Plan as presented in H.B. 33. Ohio has made great progress on this front in the current biennium, and I ask you to help lead us on our path to progress. Again, I thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony and I thank you for your service to Ohio. I respectfully yield to the Chair for any questions.