Dear Chair Lehner, Senator Huffman and members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is Mark Neal and I am currently serving in my thirteenth year as an Ohio public school superintendent. In my 21 year career as a high school principal and superintendent, I have watched the Ohio Department of Education transition from that of a helpful state agency into a dysfunctional regulatory nightmare.

I recently heard the testimony of our state superintendent regarding SB 216, and I was flabbergasted by his responses to the proposals in the bill. Specifically, the cavalier responses regarding the process of obtaining supplemental and alternative licenses. I have recently endured both processes … one to get a family and consumer science position filled and the other to fill a high school art teaching position. In both cases to put it shortly… the process was an absolute nightmare. Our high school art position had gone unfilled for the two previous years because we could not locate a licensed teacher. In both of these years we started the process early and hired replacements only to have them pull out prior to the start of the school year. I have attached the email correspondence that closely details the process of getting these people properly licensed. I think these emails speak volumes about the “flexibility” of ODE that our state superintendent described in his testimony. The process was so lengthy and ridiculous that we eventually had to privately contract with a third party while we sorted out this persons licensure with the bureaucracy at ODE. It clearly is a much more efficient process to work around ODE, than it is to work with them.

When our current state auditor described ODE as the “most dysfunctional state agency that he had ever attempted to audit” last year, I was in complete agreement. I challenge any of you to call ODE right now and ask a specific question about obtaining an alternative license. More than likely, if anyone even answers the telephone, they will direct you to someone who either is not in the office or cannot answer your question. Often times, the employees listed in the directory or on the website are not even current employees. Most of the employees I have dealt with have zero experience as educators, including the state superintendent.

We have reached a point where local school superintendents and treasurers are placed in the dubious position of being caught in the middle between an overwhelming number of new state and federal laws and a bureaucracy called ODE. Let’s examine HB 338 or “Annie’s Law: that was passed last year and went into effect on April 6th, 2017. If you search this law on ODE’s website you will be directed to the *Third Grade Reading Guarantee Guidance Manual*. This law has in fact increased the look back period for school bus drivers from six to ten years without grandfathering current bus drivers. ODE has not notified one school district of the fact that many of our bus drivers cannot legally drive a bus right now as a result of this law. Their “Inactive Driver Notification” system has still not updated to include drivers impacted by this change in law. And yet… we are supposed to believe Dr. DE Maria’s testimony about the department’s timely and useful background checks on teacher aides?

The fact of the matter is that school districts are much more efficient and effective when decisions can be made locally. Local elected officials are in a much better decision to determine local priorities than a bloated state agency that receives nearly 50% of their funding from the federal government. SB 216 is a good start to rolling back some of the madness foisted upon local school districts. It is time to stop over- legislating local school districts because of the poor performance of a few.

The Ohio Department of Education has zero history of making school districts better. Their School Improvement Plans were in place for over ten years at both Lorain and Youngstown before they fell victim to state takeover. These district’s report card scores only got worse after ODE’s involvement and they have continued to worsen since state takeover. The less authority this agency has… the better for Ohio’s public school districts.

Respectfully,

Mark K. Neal

Superintendent