**S.B. 34 Proponent Testimony**
**Matthew A. Williams, MPA**

Chairman Lehner, Ranking Minority Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for providing me the opportunity to testify today in support of Senate Bill 34. My name is Matt Williams. I am the owner and president of Purchinex, LLC, a service-disabled veteran owned small business. I am also the owner and managing director of Triple Canopy Media, a digital marketing firm headquartered in Canton, Ohio.

I appear before you today the father of a 12-year-old seventh grade girl and a 15-year-old sophomore boy, both of whom attend school in Stark County. In late October of this year I was placed in the uncomfortable position of reporting the conduct of a male teacher at my daughter’s private school to the school’s headmaster. This teacher’s conduct was quickly and thoroughly investigated by the school, and the teacher’s employment was terminated the following day.

One day after the teacher was terminated, our headmaster received a letter from the Ohio Department of Education on which he was copied as the head of school. This Notice of Opportunity for Hearing was addressed to the teacher and delineated the conduct for which the State Board of Education will soon determine whether to suspend, revoke, or limit his five-year professional teaching license.

According to this hearing notice, the teacher in question, while working for another school district between 2012 and 2018, engaged in behavior that violated the Licensure Code of Professional Conduct for Ohio Educators by saying to a student, “Oh, come here. Give papa some sugar,” before giving the student a hug. He also rubbed or stroked this student’s arms and touched this student’s shoulders, lower back, and hip area. He told another student that she looked prettier with her hair flipped to the side and told her to flip her hair to the side. He also told this student that he would not give her an assignment until she told him that she loved him. He rubbed out and/or massaged another student’s buttocks, and he massaged yet another student’s upper thighs. He gave gifts to another student, called her at home, spoke with her about matters of a personal nature, including her sexuality. He persisted in meeting with students in his classroom during lunch periods with his door shut, and he continued to have individual contact with students through email and text messages after being told by administrators not to do so.

This man’s conduct was not chastened by his forced resignation under circumstances that, if a simple matter of misunderstanding, would have caused any reasonable person to be hypervigilant in guarding against further perceptions of impropriety. Free to seek employment at another school or district without fear of his conduct being immediately reported to the new school by his former employer or the Ohio Department of Education, however, this man was unwittingly hired by my daughter’s school, where he continued to engage in similar conduct.

It is simply outrageous that my daughter’s school was prevented by Ohio law from being informed of an active investigation into misconduct committed by this teacher, the character of his prior employment, or the terms under which he was discharged. The statutory notice received by our headmaster arrived some eighteen months too late to be of any use in evaluating the suitability of this teacher for employment at my daughter’s school. I do not believe that this individual would have been hired by my daughter’s school had our school’s administration been privy to the facts detailed in the letter that summarized the Ohio Department of Education’s findings.

I do not know why it took eighteen months for the Ohio Department of Education to conclude its investigation, though I suspect that they are overtasked and under-resourced. It offends the conscience that the foregoing scenario is the direct result of a deficiency in state law. Among other provisions, Senate Bill 34 would allow the Ohio Department of Education to confidentially share details about ongoing investigations into teacher misconduct, so that hiring officers at other schools might be fully informed if they elect to hire teachers who are under investigation.

This matter has caused much difficulty for the administration, faulty, staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders of our school. A hiring decision that appeared reasonable at the time is being called into question. Accusations are being hurled as to who knew what when and what could have been done to prevent this unfortunate situation from visiting our school community.

I implore this committee and the Ohio Senate to take whatever measures may be required, however extraordinary, to pass into law this provision that would have obviated the risk posed to my daughter and her classmates. I am optimistic that the renewed focus on this legislation may result in a change in Ohio law, and I ask that you move expeditiously to address this matter using every tool and resource at your disposal. Put simply, we have all failed our children. We must do better.

The practice described in my testimony is known as “Passing the Trash.” It is a well-known practice that has been extensively documented by news outlets, community action groups, and concerned citizens throughout the country. I have yet to encounter anyone—and I have spoken to hundreds of people of the past several weeks about this issue—who believes that the status quo is acceptable. In fact, I have encountered some who, when presented with the statute and the implications of the current law concerning disclosure by ODE of teacher misconduct to schools inquiring of the same, resolutely refute the claim that our school was not notified of this teacher’s past. They find my explanation to be so outrageous that they flatly refuse to accept as fact that, under Ohio law, our school was not and could not be informed of this teacher’s prior misconduct. When a law so egregiously offends common sensibility as to literally be unbelievable, it deserves—at a minimum—the greatest degree of scrutiny to which we might subject it.

Please, for the sake of our children, adopt this provision of Senate Bill 34 and make those who would harm our children accountable for their misconduct. Protect our children and make our schools safer.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today in support of Senate Bill 34, and I would be happy to answer any questions that the Committee may have.