

Austin Keller Sub. H.B. 110 Testimony**Ohio Senate Finance Committee****June 3, 2021**

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chairman Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes, and Senate Finance Members. My name is Austin Keller, and I'm from North Royalton, Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Sub. H.B. 110, the State Operating Budget for Fiscal Year 2022 and Fiscal Year 2023. The testimony I am about to give is due in part to the budget that all three active branches of our state government have put forward. The purpose of this budget is simply to provide Ohio citizens with the best resources needed to prosper for the next two years. Today I wish to take a look at a tiny part of this elaborate, robust budget; School safety, and the people who dedicate themselves daily to protecting our future, and our children- School Resource Officers.

Like many here in this room, I am a product of the Ohio school system, an outstanding system which works tirelessly to equip young minds to take on the world in just a few short years. After twelve years of schooling I was fortunate enough to graduate from North Royalton High School in 2020, a sprawling middle class, high performing school district in Northeast Ohio. Now an alumni I have set my sights on returning to the classroom once more, but as an educator myself. Growing up in such an exceptional district never made me feel insecure nor troubled by the thought of someone wishing to come to my school to do great harm. However, not many students can say the same. But why? As it stands, in 2013 about 75% of all Ohio schools had a School Resource Officer, a dedicated individual set aside to ensure the utmost security and protection for every student within their district. While 75% is an outstanding number to achieve, I believe that Ohio needs to budget to hit 100% by the end of Fiscal Year 2023.

As it stands within the budget now, Sub. H.B. 110 offers \$2.7 million in each fiscal year for the Ohio School Safety Center, an increase of \$2.4 million over Fiscal Year 2021. While I am no ambassador to the OSSC, I believe that that amount should be amped up.

If funding to organizations like the OSSC, and the National Associations of School Resource Officers are increased, money could be better distributed to allow for more schools to help Ohio hit that 100% that we need. As it stands, Ohio will only grow to 100% slowly. As

there is barely enough money for grants to be passed around. For example, a school district applying for a grant through the OSSC to try and cover the cost of training and hiring an SRO only has one option, a grant offered by the Ohio Attorney General's Office which allocated \$2,500 or \$5.15 per pupil, whichever is greater. I believe an investment needs to be made to offer schools higher paying grants to properly train and equip these dedicated men and women who wish to be such great role models within our schools.

It is not just the training and salary that requires substantial amounts of money, the equipment SROs need in order to perform to the best of their ability is very costly. For example, body cameras are incredibly important yet expensive to maintain and operate. According to a 2018 study from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, as of 2016 only 46% of American Law Enforcement Agencies were fiscally equipped to handle body cameras. So, it is important to not just get as many SROs in a school as we can but to also maintain them the best we can.

So why is all of this relevant? Well it's simple. On the surface SROs appear to just be an armed guard to protect school children. But the reality lies in the fact that they are much more. They are drug counselors, family counselors, the liaison to juvenile courts for a young man or woman trying to restart their life because their upbringing set them off on the wrong foot. And most importantly, they are a role model to their community, one who can drive down the School-to-prison pipeline. In a time and age where only 48% of Americans trust law enforcement, it is critical to get them in the schools to surround young children with their presence so they can see that law enforcement is not a bad thing. In turn I believe it will spark enthusiasm for more children to grow up to want to be a police officer.

So to conclude, ask yourself this, what could be more important than the safety of our students in our schools? Recent history has shown us that SROs are pivotal in keeping our schools safe, as they are the front line of defense for our young children. In short the budget that's being proposed today is an outstanding one geared to help us Ohioans as much as possible. But I think it is important to look ahead to the future as you pass Sub. H.B. 110. In this case to ensure that every community has suitable numbers of SROs based on their population and geography, as well as to make sure they are properly maintained both physically with their equipment and monetarily with proper funding. In turn, I am confident that communities will heal and reseal the bond they once had with law enforcement, and will additionally make every student and staff member within their school feel safe and at home, just as they should.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Vice Chairman Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes, and Senate Finance Committee Members for the opportunity to testify, I hope you will take my recommendations into consideration as Sub. H.B. 110 is soon to be passed. Thank you.