

The following is a story detailing the spin ODE is putting on the budget cuts.

Education Czar Seeks to Reset School Funding Debate as Subcommittee Wraps-Up

The governor's education czar sought to reset the discussion around education funding Friday as the House Primary and Secondary Education Subcommittee concluded testimony from proponents as well as opponents, including school districts critical of net funding losses in a time of expanding school choice.

In a question and answer session in the governor's office, 21st Century Education Director Bob Sommers responded to a range of issues, including net cuts to per-child funding, health care pooling, performance-based teaching, state versus local school tax dollars, gifted funding, school innovation, academic rankings adjusted for per-child expenditures, parental school takeover, accountability of charter school sponsors, and the pending threat of school district lay-offs.

Responding to various school district warnings Friday (see testimony on HB153 bill page), as evidenced by major press coverage of Solon City Schools, Sommers said actual cuts to districts are "rarely" more than 3-4 percent of their total budgets when local levies are factored in, and center on administration and operations rather than classroom instruction.

"Because it's such a small percentage of their overall budget, the actual cut is not as significant," he said, responding to one estimate of 25,000 lost education jobs under HB153 (Amstutz).

"We can make anything look draconian," said Sommers. "I think that any district that starts by cutting teachers is short-sighted."

He also responded to the argument that Kasich's education budget is a *de facto* if not formal policy shift toward more local taxation.

"The budget proposal we're putting up is as much dealing with bad policy in the past, not just the lack of state dollars," he said. "We're really clear on this point: Don't raise taxes at the local level."

He surveyed a number of opportunities for cost savings that, according to the administration, could balance cuts over time, including health care.

"There are some exceptionally good health care pools out there," he said of district medical coverage. "The problem is that many schools are not already in them."

Sommers also addressed major cuts to educational service centers (ESC), particularly in the second year of the biennium. "If you move money to the frontline decision makers," he said of ESC restructuring, "they'll make the best decisions if you hold them accountable."

The House subcommittee has heard numerous complaints this week from gifted educators and families who fear services will be cut without a dedicated funding stream.

"We actually made no changes in the amount of dollars sent to districts for gifted education," he said, acknowledging the flexibility provided local schools. "Do you require districts to spend money on gifted education or not? We believe the decision should be made at the local level."

Sommers said while shared purchasing of goods and services holds immediate promise, he called major moves toward district consolidation "very difficult."

"If a decision to consolidate is the right one, we think local taxpayers should make that decision," he said.

On the equally thorny subject of school takeover, Sommers was unapologetic. "If you have a school in the bottom 5 percent of the state -- we should be contentious," he said, calling the parental option a "last ditch effort."

Sommers responded to joint concerns raised by the Ohio School Boards Association, Buckeye Association of School Administrators, and Ohio Association of School Business Officials, who testified Wednesday that the decision to close a school or remove its leadership should be left to duly elected school officials.

"If they focus on the needs of students, our proposal will have nothing but a positive impact," he said.

Sommers also provided an update on community school sponsor language in the budget bill. "We know we want to restrict slow-performing sponsors," he said. "We think our initial proposal might be too tight for that."

Joining him was Barbara Mattei-Smith, the governor's assistant policy director for education, who has been managing this year's "bridge" funding formula for Kasich. (See *The Hannah Report*, 4/1/11.) She responded to concerns raised at Friday's subcommittee by Columbus schools Superintendent Gene Harris, who said the governor's expenditure-based academic ranking system would not account for the many challenged sub-groups in her district, which incur much greater cost than average-to-excellent students.

Not so, countered Mattei-Smith, who said the "School District Fiscal Benchmark Report FY10" posted at the Ohio Department of Education website shows expenditure-based rankings would adjust for various student sub-groups, including special education and second-language learners.

Sommers acknowledged that the move toward greater cost-benefit in public education, combined with the increased exodus of school choice participants and the continued evolution of 21st century models of student centered learning, suggest some growing pains as public education finds a new equilibrium of competitive districts, charters and voucher programs.

"We continue to propose policy changes that put what's right for the student first, which sometimes does not look like what we've done in the past," he said. "We think that's more important than maintaining the status quo of the system. Then you have to manage costs effectively. All the rest of it is detail."

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