

House Finance Subcmte on Primary and Secondary Summary 4/6/11

Randy Cole, president of the Controlling Board and policy advisor to Budget Director Tim Keen, offered clarifying remarks about several provisions of the administration's budget proposal, including the proposed consolidation of educational service centers and technology centers and the cost of school employee health care. "Pooling is just one tool," he said of health care savings.

Rep. Phillips said proposed restructuring in various areas of public education are not going to help school districts in the upcoming biennium. "How are our schools supposed to cope in terms of real dollars?"

Cole remarked that although proposed changes are "worthwhile goals" in and of themselves, regardless of the economy, "current conditions make them timely."

Ohio Educational Service Center Association

Executive Director Craig Burford said that for every dollar in state funding, educational service centers (ESC) provided \$26 in programs and services to school districts last year.

"This return on investment is made possible through contracts with school districts as well as the administration of state and federal grants on behalf of school districts and other community-based organizations including CARE teams, Head Start, Family and Children First Councils, Help Me Grow and more," he said.

Burford remarked on the proposed 10 percent cut to ESCs in FY12 and the 30 percent cut in FY13. "Ohio's ESCs are willing to accept their proportional share of the requisite cuts to balance the budget," he said. "A 30 percent cut in the second year of the biennium, however, is a disproportionate cut that will directly impact the ability of ESCs to provide cost-effective programs and services. Every time the state directly cuts ESCs, those cuts are passed on to school districts."

At the same time, Burford said "ESC's see promise in the shared services proposal and efficiency solutions advanced by the administration."

Rep. Lundy remarked on Burford's comment about passed-down district costs. "It seems to be a theme we're seeing this year."

Ohio Alliance for Public Charter Schools

President William Sims commended budget provisions promoting performance transparency at charter schools. He called proposed funding “fair,” considering the economic times, but said community schools had been “under-funded” in Ohio for years, with references to lower per-pupil dollars than district schools and the continuing lack of facilities funding.

Sims did express approval for the proposed leasing of unused district facilities. “In fact, we think it makes sense to add language that would enable districts to unburden themselves of these fixed costs by deeding such properties over to charters for a dollar, with safe-guard provisions that would automatically deed the property back to the district or state if the community charter school were to fail for some reason or another.”

In response to Lundy’s questions about community school performance, Sims acknowledged that charters expanded rapidly in their initial years without being provided some necessary quality controls.

“I think this Legislature has taken significant steps to do just that,” he said, also noting the importance of value-added components to measure the real progress of otherwise challenged students.

Lundy responded that many charters are not excellent by any measure.

Said Sims, “They are not all performing excellent -- and neither are the district schools.”

Lundy seemed to agree on that point. “When someone is not performing well, it gives everybody a bad name.”

He asked whether Sims thought five years is too much time to allow charters to fail before shutting them down. Sims corrected him by saying the tracking period is actually three to four years.

Lundy asked how the expansion of vouchers would likely affect enrollment at charter schools. Sims said that although publicly funded private education is not his area of focus, “I think the expansion of vouchers is a good thing.”

Ohio Association of Charter School Authorizers

President Dave Cash offered a somewhat mixed review of community

school budget language.

“Although Ohio Association of Charter School Authorizers (OACSA) are pleased with the charter-friendly philosophy reflected in HB153, we strongly oppose language in Sec. 3314.016 which would prohibit sponsors from entering into contracts with community schools unless all schools in their portfolio are rated by the Ohio Department of Education as ‘continuous improvement’ or better,” he said. “While we strongly support policies that help ensure quality sponsorship, we are concerned that this provision of HB153 seems to define ‘quality’ based solely on a school’s academic ratings.”

He noted the irony of forbidding nearly all existing sponsors in Ohio from sponsoring more charter schools. “Over time, as current contracts must be renewed, existing schools would be forced to close due to lack of a sponsor.”

Cash said the success of drop-out recovery programs cannot be measured solely by academic ratings.

“Additionally, some charter schools in academic watch and emergency are demonstrating academic achievement by exceeding value-added measures,” he said, echoing Sims.

Finally, Cash noted that “national experts” recommend waiting five years before closing unsuccessful charters, not four years.

Lundy again questioned the academic performance of community schools. Cash answered that charters, unlike school districts, have a clear method of closure.

Ohio Coalition for Quality Education

Colleen Grady, director of policy and government relations, argued for high-performing teachers.

“While there may not be agreement regarding most education reform strategies, there is universal agreement that ensuring that knowledgeable and effective educators are in every classroom and school is key to improving achievement among Ohio’s students,” she said.

Grady said that while Ohio had gained a reputation in recent years for revised content standards, school improvement had not fared so well. She added that state classrooms can make much better use of technology.

“It seems that both Ohio and the nation are finally recognizing that the factory model, every student moving lockstep from kindergarten through high school, no longer works for a majority of students,” she said.

Rep. Stebelton questioned Grady on her pejorative reference to the industrial age.

“The first and best example of the factory model was Ford,” she said, “where you could have any kind of car you wanted, as long as you wanted black and a Model T.”

As examples, she pointed to students who complete all their credits before their fourth year but are not allowed to leave high school because districts would lose their per-child allotment. She said overall that academic standard and content delivery moves toward the middle, neglecting both low- and high-performing students.

“I’m struck by how long we’ve permitted failure in our public schools,” Stebelton agreed, specifically noting academic emergency and academic watch ratings in a number of schools around Ohio.

“Ohio has not been as aggressive as other states in intervening in public schools,” Grady said, pointing to the state’s recent Race to the Top application. “That was probably the weakest area for Ohio -- intervening in failing schools.”

Lundy noted the frequent references to failing public schools in Ohio and the nation, and asked when the problems had really started.

“The tipping point? I don’t think Ohio is unique in this area,” Grady said, noting downward trends going back at least two decades.

“Our expectations for the performance of students over the past 10 years have not been very high,” she said.

Lundy challenged any temptation to generalize about school district performance, noting Cleveland schools are very different than Strongsville schools. “There are so many sociological factors, so many economic factors.”

Grady did not disagree but suggested that cannot be the only consideration. “All districts, all schools will face the same issues. It’s just

the degree to which they face them.”

She emphasized again that the highest performing school systems in the world recruit from the top quarter of college graduating classes rather than the bottom quarter, as in the U.S. She added that principals in Ohio are often poorly trained to lead teachers in quality instruction.