

House Finance Committee
Testimony of Sally Roberts
July 7, 2009

Chairman Sykes, Ranking Member Amstutz, and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony today. My name is Sally Roberts. I am president of the Ohio Association for Gifted Children, and gifted services supervisor for the Huber Heights City Schools.

I realize that state legislators have incredibly difficult choices to make regarding the budget. I am here today because State Superintendent Delisle has indicated that funding for gifted education may be completely eliminated if the Ohio Department of Education is forced to make non foundation level cuts. Frankly, I find the prospect appalling, especially considering that gifted units are indeed part of foundation funding. I sincerely hope this hypothetical scenario is not an indication of the superintendent's educational policy priorities, and I urge you to reject this disproportionate cut as part of the state's plan to balance the budget.

A study of gifted services in Ohio, conducted by a renowned gifted expert determined that the single most important factor at the district level for providing gifted services was the presence of state gifted funding. Services to students of high ability often face cuts when local levies fail. Cuts to gifted services will be compounded to a frightening level if state support is eliminated. Ohio's current level of funding provides service to only 27% of the students identified as gifted which is down from 43% in 1998. This decrease in service is largely due to flat state funding for gifted education over the past decade. While all districts receive identification funds, over 85 districts provided no service to identified students in the 07-08 school year.

To further complicate matters for high ability students, I understand that districts rated as "excellent" or "excellent with distinction" may be exempt from many accountability mandates in the HB1. I think that would be a mistake. Even the rating "excellent with distinction" really has nothing to do with children receiving an excellent education in a district providing excellent educational opportunities. The rating is about districts getting the majority of their students to the level of "proficient". Proficiency is the minimum competency level expected of **all** children. While that may be a high bar for some students, for many others, it is a very low hurdle. Not every district rated as "excellent with distinction" is truly excellent when one digs deeper into the data. Of the seventy-four districts with this rating in 07-08:

- Five served no gifted students
- Forty-eight served less than 25% of their identified gifted students
- Fourteen districts had no subject or grade level accelerated students

- Six districts had an average ACT score of “21”, barely the state average
- Six districts offered no AP courses
- Thirty six districts had no students participating in PSEO
- Fourteen districts had college remediation rates of higher than 40%, one above 60%
- Forty-three districts had at least one building with negative value-added growth; one had seven buildings with negative growth.
- Fifty-two districts had at least one building with negative value-added growth in reading.

During this budget process, a superintendent from an “excellent” school district testified before the Senate Education Committee. He complained that his district should be exempt from state funding accountability. On the surface this makes sense, but a look into the statistics behind the excellent rating reveals an ugly truth. In terms of performance indicators met, the district met only 21 out of 30, a number which would put them at the continuous improvement level. Through a bump due to their performance index, the district rating increased to “effective.” As another sweet bonus, even though the district had **negative** value added growth in **both** math and reading in two of five grade levels, their rating was inexplicably boosted to “excellent” due to their value added growth performance. Look further and it is clear there are other issues:

- the district missed AYP for special education students.
- less than one third of the gifted population was served and the number of identified students was well under the state average.
- no Advanced Placement courses were offered.
- only 1 student had been accelerated.
- the average ACT score of the student population was less than the average state score.
- 42% of the students were required to take remedial courses in college.

Is this really an excellent school district? And should state laws and policies let districts like this off the hook for ensuring that **all** children receive appropriate opportunities for growth? The answer to both questions is a resounding, “NO!”

Gifted education in Ohio is at a critical crossroad. The path Ohio takes in the next few weeks will have a profound impact on its gifted students for years to come. Will Ohio step up and ensure that gifted students have the education and tools they need ... or will Ohio create an intellectual rust belt as it officially leaves gifted children behind? If cuts are to be made to education, I ask that you ensure that gifted students are cut no more than any other student population. Further, I ask that you require all districts to be accountable for the performance of all students – including those who are identified as gifted.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.