



Testimony to the House Finance Committee on Possible Budget Cuts

July 7, 2009

Chairman Sykes, Ranking Member Amstuz, Members of Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Ann Sheldon. I am the Executive Director of the Ohio Association for Gifted Children. I am here to testify on behalf of Ohio's gifted students, their parents, and Ohio's dedicated gifted educators.

In her testimony to this committee on July 2, 2009, State Superintendent Deborah Delisle's indicated that if the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) was forced to cut an additional \$290 million from its budget, that funding for gifted identification and service – despite being part of foundation funding – could be completely eliminated. The gifted community was stunned by the superintendent's statement. We understand that the nature of this cut is hypothetical at this point and not a real proposal. But we are distressed that this overwhelming and lopsided hit to gifted children would even be on the list of potential cuts. As the state superintendent indicated, the majority of funding for gifted education is part of both foundation funding and the federal stimulus maintenance of effort provision. So it makes no sense that gifted funding is on the cut list at all under the ODE scenario that maintains foundation funding. Regardless of ODE's logic, as Superintendent Delisle has now thrown out the possibility that gifted funding may be wiped out, I would like to share for the committee what this dooms day scenario would mean to gifted children and educators across the state.

Unlike other areas of the education budget, gifted education has been flat-funded for several years. The impact of this fiscal policy has been felt keenly by our gifted children. Over the past decade, the number of gifted students served in Ohio has dropped from 43% to the current level of 27%. If gifted funding is completely eliminated, the first thing that will happen is that gifted identification will cease to occur in many districts and 1,110 gifted coordinators and intervention specialists will be fired. The 55,000 gifted children or so that they serve will be left without services. Secondly, because the research in Ohio indicated that the presence of state funds was the single most important determinant in whether districts offered gifted services, locally supported gifted services will begin to crumble, jeopardizing the services of 20,000 additional gifted children and another 400 gifted district positions will be cut from districts. The

few districts that will continue to offer services to gifted children will be the high wealth districts that can afford to do so – although high wealth is an almost meaningless label in these days of economic pressure. Gifted children in poor, rural areas can kiss their futures good-bye as there will be virtually no opportunities for advanced learning for them. Gifted children in urban districts that are singularly focused on the low bar of proficiency will soon drop out in droves. They will understand that they are uniquely excluded from Ohio's system of free and appropriate education.

If gifted services are eliminated, the State Superintendent may need to add funding to her budget for a hotline to Terry Collins, head of the Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections. Some gifted kids who are bored in school merely tune out. Some drop out. But others act out. It is a fact, that many gang leaders are quite gifted. If we do not effectively channel their intelligence for good, gifted students often learn to direct their ability and skills in less socially acceptable pursuits. I have had the pleasure of meeting First Lady Francis Strickland on a few occasions. Each time I speak to her she has said that she believes some of our most gifted citizens are behind bars. I believe she is correct, and if gifted services are cut, we will see more. Deb Delisle may also need to add other hotlines to the Department of Job and Family Services and the Department of Mental Health. Many bored gifted students engage in risky behavior leaving them increasingly vulnerable to teen pregnancy, alcohol and drug addiction, and suicidal tendencies. The sobering research about gifted teen suicide attempt statistics is not necessarily that the number of attempts is markedly higher than in other teen populations but that the attempts are more successful. It is a chilling reminder that the ability to succeed can be a two-edge sword.

If K-12 gifted services are eliminated, Chancellor Fingerhut will soon be wondering why the level of Advanced Placement and ACT scores are declining in Ohio and why those students who still manage to score well are opting to go to any college – outside of Ohio. Value-added methodology has been used to conclusively determine that the ACT scores of high school students with appropriate services outperform students without those opportunities by an astonishing degree. The lack of a gifted mandate is probably one of the reasons that we see many of our best and brightest citizens are leaving the state in droves now. Gutting gifted services will exacerbate the problem. Why would a young gifted adult want to raise a family in a state that didn't care about their own educational needs as a child? Why would they want to raise their children in Ohio when they could move to a state that provides appropriate services to gifted children?

Finally, if gifted services are eliminated, then there will be no need for educational reform. For once we have decided to summarily abandon a subset of our student

population -- a population with amazing potential -- we will have decided once and for all that Ohio is not interested in building an infrastructure to support the future. Rather, we should just admit our commitment to mediocrity and continue to patch our rusting bridge back to the 20th century. Forget about a highly skilled workforce. Forget about high tech corridors. And forget about turning around Ohio. The upside to all of this is that we could save additional money by eliminating the Department of Development. Once we have decided that the future belongs to other states, it will no longer be possible to lure companies to Ohio.

The truth is that the gifted community has been on a roller coaster ride throughout this budget process. The gifted funding mechanism has been rewritten three times as it has moved from the introduced version of the bill through the House and then to the Senate. Along the way, over 100 witnesses supporting gifted education have testified in this chamber or in the Ohio Senate. I can't even begin to guess how many emails and phone calls have been made. At every stage in this budget, gifted education funding issues have needed to be resolved. I am overwhelmed by and deeply thankful for the amazing amount of support for gifted children that we have found in both chambers and on both sides of the aisle as well as in the governor's office. However, this process has taken a huge toll on gifted services throughout the state. The uncertainty of funding has caused many districts to slash programs and positions. This budget process, quite frankly, has been overlong, overwrought, and now overdue. It is now July 7, and I still cannot tell gifted educators how or if they will be funded next year. Directors of the Summer Honors Institutes scrambled last week to cancel or to try to secure other funding for programs that were to begin this week. Even though funding for the Institutes were included in both the House and Senate budgets, there are no funds included in the interim budgets. The impact of the continuing budgets make it likely that many of the gifted staff who have contingent contracts based on the availability of state funds will be terminated as districts become more nervous about funding.

I am not here to beg you to exclude gifted education from cuts if you decide that all education funding must be cut more. But I am going to ask that if you do make additional cuts to education funding, that you do not cut gifted funding any more than you would cut any other area in foundation funding. And I hope you will protect gifted education funding from complete annihilation by specifying in the bill that further budget cuts to education during the biennium will not be shouldered disproportionately by gifted children or any other special student population.