



Testimony to the House Finance Primary and Secondary Education Subcommittee on HB64

March 12, 2015

Chairman Cupp, Ranking Member Phillips, members of the subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on HB64. My name is Ann Sheldon, and I am the Executive Director of the Ohio Association for Gifted Children (OAGC).

Gifted education funding in Ohio has gone through multiple revisions over the last six years. With the dismantling of the gifted unit funding system after 2008, gifted education funding operated under a “maintenance of effort” provision until the last biennium. This provided absolute flexibility for districts to use state gifted funding to meet the needs of gifted children as they wished. This approach resulted in huge decreases in gifted identification, service, and staffing levels. (Please see the attached “**2015 State of Gifted Education**” for more details). The gifted funding component introduced in the last biennium provided, at least on paper, significant increases in funding through a formula that was calculated inside the foundation funding formula. (In the old gifted unit funding system, gifted funds were allocated outside the formula.) However, because the accountability provisions for the funding are weak and unenforced by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), the only funding that is undisputedly allocated to gifted education is **\$3.8** million in ESC funding for gifted coordinators and intervention specialist units.

In HB64, the gifted education funding formula from the last biennium is retained. This should result in the current funding level of about **\$72** million to districts. *(The formula allows **\$5.05** per ADM for the identification of gifted students. In addition, one gifted coordinator unit of funding is allocated for every **3,300** students in a district’s gifted unit ADM, with a minimum of **0.5** units and a maximum of **8** units allocated for the district, plus one gifted intervention specialist unit is allocated for every **1,100** students in a district’s gifted unit ADM, with a minimum of **0.3** units allocated for the district. Each unit is valued at **\$37,750**. The value of each unit is very low, which would suggest that the formula does not provide an adequate level of funding.)* Unfortunately, the majority of school districts report that they are not spending the current allocated amounts of gifted funding on gifted students. Under-spending on gifted education is a particular problem in smaller, rural districts. In part, this is due to the cut in gifted ESC unit funding in the last biennium from **\$8.1** million to **\$3.8** million. Smaller districts depend heavily on ESCs to provide gifted services. The theory in the last biennium was that districts would use gifted funding inside the formula to pay ESCs for needed services. In practice, this has not happened in many cases.

OAGC requests that gifted ESC funding be increased back to the 2011/2012 level of \$8.1 million. ESCs supporting smaller, low-wealth districts should be given priority in funding. We also ask that the cap on gifted funding in the education funding formula be removed and that gifted funding be moved outside of the transitional aid guarantee to allow more funding to flow to smaller districts.

Accountability

As critical as funding is, accountability for the use of gifted funds is just as important. Despite the fact that ORC 3317.40 states that districts are intended to use student sub-group funding for that specific sub-group, **335** districts are spending below their (capped) allocated gifted funding formula amount. Less than one-quarter of all gifted students are served in Ohio. In fact, **227** districts report serving fewer gifted students than they did five years ago; **228** have decreased gifted identification, and **141** districts report serving no gifted children at all. If gifted students were all performing well, this would be less concerning. Yet, only **154** districts met the 2014 gifted performance indicator. **OAGC requests the following provisions be enacted to improve this situation:**

1. **Increase the level of accountability for gifted funding by requiring all districts to spend gifted funding in the foundation formula on identification and appropriately licensed gifted personnel.** Districts showing great promise in the area of gifted performance could be waived from this requirement.
2. **Require ODE to collect and post data on gifted services offered by each district by grade band as well as the number of licensed gifted personnel employed or contracted by the district.** This would allow parents to determine the types and levels of services provided to gifted students.
3. **Revise the sub-group accountability language to allow ODE to use the full gifted performance indicator to gauge the success of the gifted sub-group.** Currently, ODE only uses the gifted performance index and gifted value-added scores. ODE staff has indicated that ORC restricts them from including the full gifted performance indicator. ODE should be able to evaluate the gifted sub-group based on the full gifted performance indicator.
4. **Require that districts indicating that gifted students are served must be providing services that are either accelerated or supported at minimum levels by qualified gifted intervention specialists.** Too many districts are indicating that gifted students are being served even though the “services” provided are undefined levels of differentiated instruction from a classroom teacher with minimal or no training in gifted education and no support from a gifted intervention specialist. This is an attempt by some districts to increase served numbers to gain gifted input points on the gifted performance indicator. Beyond the inherent ethical question of this practice, it greatly hinders the ability to determine whether and which gifted services have the greatest impact on gifted student performance. If anything can be called service, than nothing is service.

Additional Concerns/Requests

In addition to funding and accountability issues, OAGC has the following concerns and requests:

Testing Reductions – HB64 limits assessments to two percent of the school year with certain exemptions for assessments for children with disabilities and limited English proficient students. **OAGC recommends that any testing limitation should exempt assessments to identify gifted students. OAGC also calls for a moratorium on the use of PARCC assessments for gifted identification until the assessment is reviewed for this purpose through the established ODE process for reviewing and approving tests for use in gifted screening/identification.**

Education De-regulation — OAGC is concerned about the proposed elimination of certain regulations for high-performing districts in HB64. While the definition of high-performing is generally rigorous, there is no provision for the performance of student sub-groups, which should be a compelling factor in determining whether a district is high-performing across the board. Allowing the district to keep the designation for three years only if the third-grade reading proficiency component of high-performance is maintained is also problematic. We are particularly alarmed that the state superintendent would be allowed to waive any law, rule, or standard at his or her discretion. This would give the state superintendent more authority than any elected official including the governor. **OAGC recommends that this provision be removed. We also recommend that the definition of high-performing ensure that all sub-group value-added grades be at least a “B” or higher. In addition, the district should only be allowed to keep a high-performing designation for two years if their overall and sub-group value-added measures are maintained.**

Development of Alternative Providers for Gifted Services -- OAGC believes that it is time to open up alternative service models for gifted students such as regional gifted schools, expanded community schools for gifted children in areas of high need, open enrollment, and vouchers. Gifted students represent 16% of the student population in Ohio and 23% of this population is served. Therefore, it is reasonable that a percentage of the Straight A fund be used to fund initiatives that would support gifted children in creative and effective ways throughout the state.

Administrators Serving as Coordinators -- OAGC requests that the provision that allows qualified principals and others to serve as gifted coordinators be revised. This provision has been misinterpreted to mean that *any* administrator can serve as a gifted coordinator. This has undermined gifted support in many districts, where very few individuals have any gifted training. There are now whole counties in Ohio with no access to licensed gifted coordinators. Districts in these counties lag in services to gifted students. Gifted student performance is suffering as a result.

Changes to College Credit Plus (CC+) – While OAGC supports the College Credit Plus program, there are additional changes that could make the program more student-friendly. The rules developed for CC+ prohibit students from taking more than 30 college credits per year with an overall limit of 120 college credits. This unfairly penalizes 7th and 8th graders who may need to exceed this limit. Also, some college programs require more than 120 college credits. In addition, one of the gatekeepers keeping students from accessing CC+ is the district use of weighted grades which penalizes students taking CC+ courses. The CC+ rules require districts to provide the highest weight to CC+ courses that the district awards in a particular subject area. This is unhelpful to the student who is taking very high-level CC+ courses because the district does not offer any advanced courses in that subject. Finally, OAGC is concerned that there are not enough funds for non-public and homeschooled students to meet the demand for CC+ courses. In addition, many public students may be unable to afford CC+ fees to private colleges and universities. **OAGC asks that college credit limitations should be altered or removed and that the highest district weight be applied to any CC+ course a student takes. We also recommend that increased funds be allocated to ensure that all students can access CC+, including public students who wish to access private CC+ courses. We support the proposal to provide additional funds to access CC+ programs, but we recommend that any awards for completion be targeted to the neediest districts. Finally, we remain opposed to charging students for taking CC+ courses.**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions you have.