**Thomas J. Gibbs**

**Testimony in Opposition of HB 597**

**August 26, 2014**

Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Speaker Batchelder, Ranking Member Heard, and members of the House Rules Committee, I am Tom Gibbs and I am here today to testify in opposition to House Bill 597. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak.

I am currently the Associate Superintendent of the Athens City School District, a consolidated district in Athens County that covers 89 square miles and has an enrollment of approximately 2,700 students. Prior to coming to Athens in August of 2013, I held the position of Superintendent of the Warren Local School District in Washington County for 8 years. For the last 15 months of my tenure at Warren, I simultaneously held the position of Superintendent at the neighboring Fort Frye Local School District. During that time, I served approximately 3,500 students who were spread out over nearly 340 square miles, and answered to two school boards.

Since the adoption of Ohio’s most recent iteration of the Academic Learning Standards in English/Language Arts and Mathematics in 2010, I have worked with literally hundreds of teachers in communities that represent some of the most liberal and some of the most conservative in the state of Ohio. I sat on the District Leadership Teams for each of the three districts, and worked collaboratively with the Boards of Education and the Teacher’s Unions at each of the three districts. I have yet to encounter a teacher who has questioned me about Ohio’s current Learning Standards. I have only encountered a handful of parents or community members who have questioned the standards, and those who did speak with me were satisfied when they learned that Ohio statute does not require any district to adopt a specific curriculum to teach the standards and that local Boards of Education and administration have considerable latitude in working with teaching faculty to develop curricula and adopt materials that are deemed to be appropriate for each specific district.

The adoption and implementation of new standards for learning is no easy task. The teachers that I have worked with have spent countless hours completing “cross-walks” comparing the prior standards with the new, realigning curricula, assessing gaps, and developing curriculum maps and pacing guides to assure that all children have access to the knowledge necessary to be college and career ready. It has taken four years to assure that every teacher is trained and prepared to implement the new, more rigorous content.

In addition to my work as a school administrator, I am the father of a third grade student. Over the weekend I took the time to revisit Ohio’s Learning Standards in English/Language Arts and Mathematics. I felt compelled to look at the standards again, using the critical eye of a parent. I could not find fault with the standards. In fact, I was reminded of the descriptive detail in relation to how the standards should be implemented, including this excerpt in relation to concerns that some have about recommendations for the use of informational text:

The Standards set requirements not only for English language arts (ELA) but also for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Just as students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas, so too must the Standards specify the literacy skills and understandings required for college and career readiness in multiple disciplines. Literacy standards for grade 6 and above are predicated on teachers of ELA, history/social studies, science, and technical subjects using their content area expertise to help students meet the particular challenges of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language in their respective fields. (Ohio ELA Learning Standards, p. 3).

This excerpt clearly indicates that teaching the skills necessary for reading and applying informational text are not the sole responsibility of teachers of English/Language Arts, but must be integrated into other content areas where the use of such text is very common place and necessary for learning content specific knowledge.

Furthermore, included in the introduction to the ELA Learning Standards is a description of what is NOT covered in the standards, including the following:

The Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach. For instance, the use of play with young children is not specified by the Standards, but it is welcome as a valuable activity in its own right and as a way to help students meet the expectations in this document. Furthermore, while the Standards make references to some particular forms of content, including mythology, foundational U.S. documents, and Shakespeare, they do not—indeed, cannot—enumerate all or even most of the content that students should learn. The Standards must therefore be complemented by a well-developed, content-rich curriculum consistent with the expectations laid out in this document. (Ohio ELA Learning Standards, p. 6).

Similar explanation is present in Ohio’s Mathematics Learning Standards. The Mathematics Standards improve upon the prior standards by encouraging teachers to help students dive more deeply into the study of mathematics, to reach a level of understanding beyond memorization of a standard algorithm. Professors at The Ohio State University that work with Math Coaches throughout Ohio call this developing “enduring understanding”. In short, memorization falls short of providing students the true foundational understanding of Mathematics that is necessary to allow for advanced study of Mathematics in high school and beyond.

I would not call myself a die-hard supporter of the Common Core. I would, however, consider myself a supporter of “common sense”. It is illogical to presume that turning the clock back to 2010 and negating the implementation of these standards will advance the system of public education in Ohio. If there are specific standards that we believe need to be updated or reviewed, let us work together to add them as appropriate. To completely undo the work of thousands of teachers across the state, in my humble opinion, is not in the best interest of our teachers, nor our children.

Additional language that is proposed in HB 597, includes the following:

Sec. 3301.078. (D) Notwithstanding anything in the Revised Code to the contrary, no state funds shall be withheld from a school district or school for failure to adopt or use the state academic content standards or the state assessments (p. 9, lines 258-261).

This text could present a set of conditions that would allow low-performing schools, traditional or charter, to completely ignore the educational needs of our children with no recourse. This verbiage is completely unnecessary, considering that the following is already included in statute:

Sec. 3301.079 (B)(3) All school districts, community schools, and STEM schools **may** (my emphasis) utilize the state standards and the model curriculum established by the state board……Nothing in this section requires any school district to utilize all or any part of a model curriculum developed under this section. (p. 14, lines 409-419.

It is clear under existing statute that school districts and local boards of education have free will to develop and/or adopt standards and curricula other than those proposed and adopted by the Ohio Board of Education. I am unaware that any district has taken this course of action. Should we consider changing the existing statute given these circumstances?

In effect, some of the proposed language in HB 597 appears to be another effort to allow low-performing schools an open door to continue taking state aid with no requirement to demonstrate that students are receiving a quality education.

Some proponents of HB 597 argue that the adoption of Ohio’s current Learning Standards in ELA and Mathematics are causing teachers to change how they teach. I argue that this is not the case, with the exception that teachers are encouraged to increase the academic rigor in relation to classroom activities. What is having a much more onerous and negative impact on our public school classrooms is the culture of high-stakes testing that is forced on the states by the No Child Left Behind Act and exacerbated in Ohio by the existing over-reliance of student growth measures on teacher evaluation and the lack of fiscal support in regards to the effective implementation of technology in our schools.

If legislators were to revisit current Ohio statute in relation to standards, curriculum and testing, they would be better served, in my opinion, to address the current system of excess testing in schools, to make adjustments to the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES) as it relates to student growth measures, and to take action to provide the resources necessary for schools to effectively implement required on-line testing.  These issues are of great import, as they are causing much distraction and for little purpose.

The 3rd Grade Reading Guarantee is faulty from inception, but the obvious issue that must be addressed is the requirement to have schools implement two separate testing systems in the same school year, as well as the cumbersome and time-consuming process of diagnostic testing that is required. While some remediation to the prior statute was made to assure that individual children are not “double tested”, the issue still exists that requires schools to practically shut-down through much of the spring to administer state mandated testing. This same problem is present at high schools across the state where teachers will be administering both Ohio Graduation Tests and end of course exams. Many teachers will be spending literally weeks of time in devotion to testing, in lieu of time better spent instructing our children.

The Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES), as implemented, has significant shortcomings.  The most obvious of which is the component of connecting the evaluation directly to student growth.  In concept this makes sense, however in reality we do not have sufficient measures to determine the connection.  In many cases, teachers across the state have to come up with measures on their own (called SLOs, or student learning objectives).  As you can imagine the variation across the state is tremendous.  I'm disappointed that we continue to place such a great emphasis on this process that was obviously not well thought out prior to legislation and implementation.  It is a stressful and unnecessary distraction from the important work our educators should be focused upon.

Lastly, there is little evidence that requiring a student to take a test online has a benefit over paper/pencil technology.  Nor, is there evidence that the legislature has allocated resources to districts to make up for the gap in available technology for this purpose.  In short, districts with fewer resources and the children who attend them will be placed at a disadvantage yet again because they will not have had as frequent of an opportunity to use computers on a daily basis and therefore this will negatively impact the testing environment.  Until we have addressed the issues of infrastructure and access to technology, and made the appropriate investments in these areas, we should not move forward with this change.  If we do, we will be placing our most at-risk students in a position where they cannot be successful.

In summary, I support the Ohio Learning Standards (often referred to as the Common Core) in Reading/Language Arts and Mathematics.  However, I would encourage the Legislature to take action to correct current issues related to the amount of testing required in our schools, to address concerns in relation to student growth measures and teacher evaluation, and to provide the necessary resources to districts to fully implement the use of technology into daily instruction if the intent is to move forward with online state testing methodologies: None of which are issues that are inherent to the implementation and success of Ohio’s Learning Standards. Furthermore, I would encourage members of the legislature to apply pressure to our representatives at the Federal level to address the longstanding concerns with the testing required within the No Child Left Behind Act. If there is an unnecessary intrusion of the Federal Government in our state system of education, it rests more closely with the creation of a culture of testing than with any mutually created academic content standards.

Chairman Huffman and members of the committee, thank you again for this opportunity to express my views on House Bill 597 and related concerns. I would be happy to address any questions you might have.