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OHIO URBAN SCHOOL LEADERS TESTIFY BEFORE STATE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE

(Columbus OH) – Leaders of Ohio's eight largest urban school districts testified before the Ohio Senate Finance Committee on May 29 in support of Gov. Ted Strickland's biennial budget proposal. The testimony marked the first time that Ohio's urban school superintendents and teacher union presidents had presented combined testimony before members of the Ohio General Assembly.

Dr. Eugene T. W. Sanders, CEO of the Cleveland Municipal School District and co-chair of the Ohio 8 Coalition, offered the testimony on behalf of the coalition. He was joined by leaders from the Akron Public Schools, Canton City Schools, Cincinnati Public Schools, Columbus Public Schools, Dayton Public Schools, Toledo Public Schools and Youngstown City Schools.

The eight districts make up the Ohio 8 Coalition, which was established in 2001 as a strategic alliance of the superintendents and teacher union presidents from Ohio's eight big-city school districts. The coalition represents nearly 240,000 students.

Sanders noted the historic occasion of the first-ever testimony, indicating that: "We do so because the budget you are considering is critical to sustaining public education in Ohio's big cities."

After thanking the General Assembly for the investments made in rebuilding school facilities, he continued by saying "our encouragement to you today is to complement these physical environments with investment strategies that will provide better academic environments for our children, our employees and our communities."

Sanders highlighted the increase in academic achievement by Ohio's urban districts, noting that the urban districts in Ohio have improved at a more rapid rate than the state as a whole.

"One benchmark of improvement is Ohio's Performance Index, which reflects the achievement of every tested student. Since the 2000-2001 school year, the Ohio 8 districts have posted an average gain of 19.6 percentage points on the Index, compared with the statewide increase of 14.2 points," Sanders said.

Governor Strickland's plan called for an end to Ohio's statewide voucher program that uses public money to pay private school tuition for children in low-scoring schools, a moratorium on the creation of new charter schools, and a prohibition against charter schools being run by private, for-profit companies.

The Ohio 8 Coalition

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Sanders urged finance committee members to reinstate the governor's proposal to postpone the establishment of new charter schools until a review of the charter school program can be conducted. The governor's proposals had been stripped in the version passed by the Ohio House of Representatives.

More than half of Ohio's charter schools are still in academic emergency and the state can't afford the dozens of academic and fiscal failures that constitute the state's charter program, he said.

"Voters in our cities have over the decades approved spending their money on public education," Sanders said. "They have not voted for vouchers or charter schools.

"After nearly a decade of trying and more than two billion dollars in taxpayer funds, more than half of Ohio's charter schools are still academic emergencies," he said. "Ohio cannot afford the dozens of academic and fiscal failures that constitute the state's charter program."

Sanders also urged legislators to reinstate the governor's proposals that would have eliminated the so-called Ed Choice voucher program, as well as a newly proposed voucher program for special education students.

"Our special education costs already exceed the levels of state and federal support," Sanders said. "Siphoning off additional financial resources from the public schools will only make it more difficult for districts to support the learning needs of the great majority of special education students who will continue in the traditional public schools."

Sanders pointed out that urban districts in Ohio "are among the most innovative school systems in the country," including single-gender schools, early college high schools, twilight schools, credit-recovery programs, schools tailored to science and math, medicine, visual and performing arts and architecture, as well as international baccalaureate programs.

"The educational choices offered by our school districts come with an accountability that is both transparent and timely," Sanders told the senators. "Believe me, if something goes wrong in one of our schools, you will read about it tomorrow – not three years after the fact. Our board meetings, our financial records are open to the public. . . All school systems that are supported by the Ohio taxpayer should be held to uniformly high standards of accountability and transparency that protect the rights of all children."

Dr. Sanders concluded the coalition's testimony by saying, "We are committed to excellence in education within a true public school environment. We stand willing to be accountable for our results."

The full text of the Ohio 8 testimony is available at the coalition's website www.ohio8.org. The Ohio General Assembly is required to adopt the biennium budget by June 30, 2007.

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