



**TESTIMONY TO THE
SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE**

**SENATOR JOHN CAREY, CHAIRMAN
May 29, 2007**

Chairman Carey and members of the committee: Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of the Governor's education budget.

I am Dr. Eugene Sanders, CEO and Superintendent of the Cleveland Municipal School District and co-chair of the Ohio 8 Coalition. Today, I speak on behalf of the Ohio 8 Coalition, and I am pleased to be joined in this testimony by other members of the Ohio 8 who are available to respond to any questions you might have. This coalition is a unique alliance of the superintendents and teachers' union presidents from Ohio's eight largest urban school districts -- Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo and Youngstown, all working together to improve academic performance and close the achievement gap for nearly 240,000 urban children throughout Ohio.

Today is an historic occasion for urban educators in Ohio. This is the first time that we have gathered together to present a joint testimony to a committee of the Senate or House. We do so because the budget you are considering is critical to sustaining public education in Ohio's big cities.

Let me begin by acknowledging the support the Ohio General Assembly has provided for public education. In particular, we appreciate the investments that have been made in helping to bring our school facilities up to 21st century standards.

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.

As superintendents and teacher union leaders, we know firsthand the immense challenges facing our students. Our classrooms have higher proportions of poor students who have very few educational resources at home, higher proportions of non-English speaking students and higher proportions of students who are classified as special education than the average Ohio classroom. In addition, many of our children are working hard to become the first person in their family, not only to go to college but just to graduate from high school. It would be an understatement to say that these children often have the cards stacked against them.

Results show that our students *are* improving, and improving 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.

And, as you know, five of our urban districts – Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Dayton and Toledo – are rated as Continuous Improvement. And, districts like my own in Cleveland will be in Continuous Improvement very soon.

We know we have a long way to go in assuring broad-based academic achievement for all of our students. However, I urge you not to lose sight of the fact that the hard work of students, teachers, parents and administrators is clearly paying off for Ohio's urban students.

Governor Strickland's original budget proposal is a key step in maintaining the momentum of our urban districts. The budget does not provide as much money for elementary and secondary education as we would like to see. Indeed, districts like mine in Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati, as well as several hundred smaller districts in the state, are flat-funded during the biennium.

We believe the challenges of preparing students for a 21st century world require more funds for districts throughout the state. However, we could live with the governor's proposal because it would bring us some stability against the continuous draining of resources caused by the charter school and voucher programs.

Time does not permit me to go into a detailed discussion of the budget proposal, and other education groups present here today will offer their own recommendations for the budget.

We urge you to reinstate the governor's proposals that would have eliminated the so-called Ed Choice voucher program and for-profit charter schools. Similarly, a moratorium on the establishment of new charter schools is needed now, so that a full review of the charter school program can be conducted before more funds are diverted away from the public schools.

One does not have to search very deep in Ohio's daily newspapers to come upon story after story of how charter schools in Ohio have promised to deliver greater student achievement only to deliver the reality of missing taxpayer dollars and shattered student dreams. 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. Ohio cannot afford the dozens of academic and fiscal failures that constitute the state's charter program.

We also urge you to reject the substitute bill proposal that would establish a new voucher program for special education students. Special education students deserve to be taught in regular classrooms with their non-disabled peers. By law, special education students are entitled to a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. They should have full access to the curriculum offered to other public school students and should be taught by highly qualified, experienced teachers.

Our special education costs already exceed the levels of state and federal support. 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.

Contrary to the assumptions by some persons, public educators are not opposed to choice. We embrace it. Ohio's urban districts are among the most innovative school systems in the country. Look at our districts and you will see single-gender schools, early college high schools, twilight schools, credit-recovery programs, schools tailored to science and math, medicine, visual and performing arts, architecture and other fields of interest, international baccalaureate programs and many more.

These educational choices are provided at buildings that are central to the fabric of their neighborhoods. Our citizens, along with the Ohio School Facilities Commission, are investing millions in facilities that have not only an academic impact but also an economic and vitality impact on the neighborhoods in which they are situated – buildings that create jobs when they're going up and buildings that re-instill pride in whole neighborhoods.

The educational choices offered by our school districts come with an accountability that is both transparent and timely. 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. Voters in our cities have over the decades approved spending their money on public education. They have not voted for vouchers or charter schools. 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.

Our public school systems are dedicated to providing children and their parents with a sustaining, consistent education throughout their school years, across grades, across schools within our districts. Our curriculum is tied directly to state standards and is designed to help each child build on the academic foundation he or she received earlier. Where districts have schools that have not been successful, they are busy identifying the problems and finding solutions that work best for that student body and that portion of our communities.

We are committed to excellence in education within a true public school environment. We stand willing to be accountable for our results.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. Now, my colleagues from the Ohio 8 and I would be pleased to respond to your questions.

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