

What's Best For Lorain County's Schools?

We listened.

Over the past three months the 16 superintendents across Lorain County commissioned a scientific phone survey to gauge public perception about our schools, policies and practices. We shared the results of that poll with groups in face-to-face meetings across the county and listened as people reacted and shared their thoughts.

In short, this is what we heard:

- Over 70% believe their school districts are doing an excellent or good job, with most respondents giving their district a "B".
- High quality teachers are the most important indicator of a high quality education, followed by college/career readiness and a comprehensive curriculum.
- Earning high marks on the state report card isn't that important.
- Two out of three respondents do not believe that increased state testing has helped students.
- Decisions are best made at the local level. Less than one out of three respondents felt that policy decisions made at the state level are in the best interests of students.
- Better than 76% support expanding preschool, especially for those students from poverty. A majority said they would increase their taxes to support such.
- School finance is the biggest challenge facing our schools.
- Respondents oppose their local tax dollars going to support for-profit and online charter schools. 70% opposed vouchers going to support private schools.

We are responding.

The vast majority of our citizens are unaware of the changes being mandated by the education policymakers in Columbus and Washington. Government officials and business leaders have falsely characterized public education as failing, choosing to advance accountability, a hyper-focus on data, and competition. This has produced high stakes tests, teacher rankings, and charter schools - but there is very little proof that these reforms are working.

It's time for a change. We (superintendents) are much to blame for not standing up to these ill-fated reforms. Based on the feedback we have received from our communities, the teachers and administrators we work with each day, and our own experiences as veteran educators, here are our recommendations to put the schools of Lorain County (and Ohio) on a trajectory toward success.

Initiative: Local Control

Concern: Developing and implementing school policies and procedures have become the work of state and federal government. Locally elected school board members have very little say about reform efforts.

Proposed Solution: Engage citizens in meaningful conversations about proposed school reform initiatives before they become law.

Our local boards of education should pass a resolution (and share it across the state) asking their legislators to draft legislation requiring Ohio's citizens to have an opportunity to review and discuss changes in education policy before they turn into educational mandates – especially when additional funding is required.

Initiative: Third Grade Reading Guarantee

Concern: Research associated with retention shows a significant negative impact on students. Retention is NOT an intervention. Public dollars in the form of vouchers are being accepted by private schools, but with no accountability for students passing the test. Accountability needs to be consistent if public dollars are received. (See Columbus Dispatch article from March 8.)

Proposed Solution: Take funds like Straight A Funds and provide them to districts that need early intervention programs...or fund all-day kindergarten for all students in the state. Instead of retention, fund 3rd grade research based intervention programs for students who meet the criteria of needing intervention. . Everyone agrees that getting all students to read is an important initiative. Fund it with the \$250,000,000 Straight A Funds instead of having a few districts compete to establish new and “innovative” programs. Or use those funds to provide all-day kindergarten for all students in the state.

Initiative: PARCC Assessments

Concern: Many districts and ITC's are not prepared technologically to implement these assessments. Teachers are concerned that the tests are too long and not developmentally appropriate for the students. There is also a concern about students having the opportunity to learn the technology skills necessary to have the test measure the subject matter and not their ability to use the technology.

Proposed Solution: There needs to be more pilot assessments and enough time given for districts to become PARCC ready. This initiative has a negative impact on

districts budgets and there needs to be ample opportunity to put the appropriate technology in place. Implement a three year phase in period of the new assessments before using them to inform district ratings. Evaluate the length and age appropriateness of the assessments.

Initiative: Ohio Teacher Evaluation System Growth Measures

Concern: Although both the building level measures and the teacher level measures are calculated within the same model, they are not calculated the same way. This creates situations where teacher level data can look different than building level data even though they use the same student test scores. Also, the PARCC Assessments are new and many districts are still struggling to prepare for implementation. This brings in to question the validity of the PARCC assessments and our ability to use them for evaluation purposes.

Proposed Solution: Have districts only use local measures of growth for 35% of the evaluation until there is time to further investigate the teacher versus building calculation. This will provide districts time to implement PARCC appropriately. It is irresponsible to make this a part of evaluation without providing districts time to implement appropriately.

Accountability is important. Assuring we get accurate data associated with that accountability is even more important.

Initiative: Charter School Accountability

Concern: Although competition is a valuable tool in pushing organizations to higher levels of achievement, the current charter/community school movement in Ohio has created a drain on state dollars for public schools that is not justified by the performance of charter community schools. In FY13 alone, Ohio deducted \$828,145,901 from public schools to charter/community schools. Specifically, in Lorain County the 14 public schools lost approximately 3,372 (5% of the total student population) to charter/community schools at a cost of \$25,919,853. The 14 Lorain Co. public school districts had an average performance index score of 98.176 versus an average of 87.074 for the charters. **In simple terms, the public schools averaged a grade of "B" as compared to the average charter community grade of "C."** Further, when comparing the value-added gain index, the public schools averaged growth of 3.231, while the charter schools averaged a dismal -2.120. Based on the aforementioned two simple metrics that continue to permeate the news, the charter/community school movement is clearly failing the students of Lorain County and ultimately costing County residents millions of dollars.

Additionally, \$4.5 million of **locally generated tax dollars** were diverted to support on-line, for profit, and other charter schools without the approval of the local school boards. These dollars were approved by local voters to support their local school district only!

Proposed Solution:

As educational institutes, it is our duty to provide ALL students with a thorough and common school experience that involves high levels of growth. It is critical that the state increase levels of accountability and oversight for charter/community schools to ensure that the aforementioned duty is fulfilled. By creating a level playing field where all schools are held to the same level of accountability and oversight, coupled with strict enforcement of said policies, public and charter/community school can coexist for the betterment of student learning.

Legislation should be passed that will limit charter school deductions to only those actual per pupil state dollars that the local district receives. ***No local funds should leave the district to support these charter schools.***

Initiative: Preschool

Concern: Research demonstrates that high-quality, developmentally appropriate early childhood programs produce short- and long-term positive effects on children's cognitive and social development. There continues to be a lack in programming available to families and barriers for families to access these educational services when they do exist. The entire community is accountable for the quality of and availability of early childhood programs provided to all children, backed by the local, state, and federal funding needed to deliver quality programs and services.

Proposed Solution: It is critical that funding be available to sustain the availability of high-quality early childhood care and education programs.

This funding is needed to

- Pull systems together that work on the behalf of young children to work collaboratively and blend expertise and resources rather than duplicate efforts.
- Strengthen currently operating providers by providing high-quality professional development including the cost of time for teachers to receive professional development Off-set the cost burden associated with accessing high-quality early childhood care and education programs for families with young children.
- Increase the capacity for more high-quality early childhood care and

education programs to be formed in school district and community based locations.

We urge the state to take immediate action to prioritize the availability of funding for early childhood care and education programs so that every child will receive the early childhood education that they need and deserve.

Join the conversation!

Over the next several months we will continue to talk to our communities about our proposed solutions. Without widespread grassroots support for change, our children will be faced with the same failed reforms. We look forward to talking with you!