

**LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE
REPORT TO THE SPRING 2024 REPRESENTATIVE ASSEMBLY**

Jeff Wensing, Chair
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Michael Farren, Board of Directors Liaison
Karen Linch, Board of Directors Alt. Liaison

The Legislative Committee’s charge is to screen, evaluate and recommend proposals to the OEA Legislative Policies for consideration by the annual session of the OEA Fall Representative Assembly. It is also responsible for recommending to the OEA Board of Directors and other appropriate entities the creation of OEA strategies for lobbying and political action in order to implement the legislative priorities, goals and policies as adopted by the Representative Assembly. The OEA Legislative Policies, as adopted by the delegates at the 2023 Fall RA, can be found on the OEA website. If hard copies are needed, please contact the office of the OEA Vice President.

The Legislative Committee held two meetings in 2023 and has held one meeting thus far in 2024 to review member suggestions, update the Legislative Policies document, and carry-out other charges assigned to the committee. The OEA Government Relations Department has supported the committee’s work.

Legislative Committee meeting held September 8-9, 2023:

The Chair led a discussion of the Legislative Committee functions and charges for 2023-2024. The committee commenced work on the Board-Adopted Charges:

The Committee completed Charge #1:

The Committee reviewed OEA Legislative Policies and made recommendations for amendments to be presented to the Fall Representative Assembly including, but not limited to, any revisions based on recommendations from the Educator Voice

Academy on ESP Recruitment and Retention.

Recommendations were received from the Government Relations staff in response to the recent budget bill included a provision for universal voucher eligibility under EdChoice. Under the new law, all K-12 students, regardless of family income or the quality of the local public schools, are eligible for a voucher to pay toward tuition for private schools that accept vouchers. These proposed amendments were aimed at increased accountability for private schools that accept vouchers:

1. Non-discrimination: This language states that OEA supports legislation that would prohibit a private school from discriminating against a student. If there are space limitations, a private school should have to hold a lottery for new students, rather than being allowed to pick and choose.
2. Fiscal accountability: This language states that OEA supports legislation that would require regular audits of private schools that accept vouchers for the use of taxpayer funds.
3. Academic accountability: This language states that OEA supports legislation to require voucher students to take the same state tests as their public-school peers. That testing data should be reported to the state and the state should issue a similar school report card as done for public schools. Currently, law allows voucher students to take different tests. While this data is reported, it is hard to find and does not offer the same “apples-to-apples” comparison as a school report card. Greater academic accountability would level the playing field and provide parents with a more informed choice.

Section 1: Ensuring the foundation of a high-quality system of public education.

B. Public dollars for public schools

OEA Supports:

- a thorough and independent evaluation on the academic and fiscal effectiveness of existing voucher programs;
- a moratorium on the expansion of current voucher programs or the creation of new ones;
- **PROHIBITING PRIVATE SCHOOLS THAT ACCEPT VOUCHERS FROM REJECTING APPLICANTS BASED UPON RACE, RELIGION, ETHNICITY, DISABILITY, SEXUAL ORIENTATION OR GENDER IDENTITY. IF THERE ARE SPACE LIMITATIONS, SCHOOLS SHOULD BE REQUIRED TO HOLD A LOTTERY FOR NEW STUDENTS;**
- **REQUIRING PRIVATE SCHOOLS THAT ACCEPT VOUCHERS TO BE SUBJECT TO REGULAR AUDITS FOR THE USE OF TAXPAYER FUNDS;**
- **REQUIRING PRIVATE SCHOOLS THAT ACCEPT VOUCHERS TO TEST ALL VOUCHER STUDENTS USING THE STATE ACHIEVEMENT TESTS,**
- **REQUIRING THE STATE TO PRODUCE A SCHOOL REPORT CARD **COMPARABLE** TO THOSE USED FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS.**

With the creation of universal eligibility for EdChoice vouchers, we now face another threat; the possibility of taxpayer support for the creation/expansion of private school facilities. Senate President Matt Huffman has publicly indicated support for providing funds to build private schools in areas of the state that do not have private school options. This is clearly at odds with OEA's position that public funds should be for public schools.

Section 1: Ensuring the foundation of a high-quality system of public education.

B. Public dollars for public schools

OEA Opposes:

- voucher plans and tuition tax credits to parents/guardians under which private school tuition is financed by public funds;
- **PUBLIC FUNDS FOR THE SUPPORT, CREATION, OR EXPANSION OF PRIVATE SCHOOL FACILITIES.**

The Committee completed Charge #2:

Reviewed and made edits to the STRS Screening Questionnaire for those candidates seeking election to the STRS, SERS and OPERS.

- The committee recommended edits to STRS Question 3 to read:
 - What is your position on **REDUCING AGE AND SERVICE REQUIREMENTS FOR RETIREMENT AND** restoring the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) payments for retirees? **HOW WOULD YOU WEIGH THE LONG-TERM SOLVENCY OF THE PENSION PLAN VERSUS DESIRE TO RESTORE BENEFITS FOR ACTIVE AND RETIRED MEMBERS?**
- The committee recommended edits to STRS Question 4 to read:
 - ~~Active employees currently contribute 14% of their salary to STRS, the highest of any of the Ohio retirement systems.~~ Under what circumstances would you support lowering the employee contribution rate? **DO YOU SUPPORT PURSUING LEGISLATION TO INCREASE EMPLOYER CONTRIBUTIONS TO STRS?**
- The committee recommended adding Question 4 from the current SERS Candidate Screening Questions to the STRS Screening Questions as the new Question 3 and renumber the remaining questions.
 - **3. WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION OF UNFUNDED LIABILITY? WHAT DO YOU FEEL IS AN ACCEPTABLE LEVEL OF UNFUNDED LIABILITY? WHY?**

Revisions were made to make candidate questions more relevant to the current STRS Retirement Board issues. There were no proposed changes to the OPERS and SERS

questionnaires.

The Committee tabled a discussion on Charge 3 until the February Legislative Committee meeting.

Evaluate, assess, and provide recommendations for the next steps in addressing OEA's Legislative priorities for the second half of the 135th General Assembly.

Legislative Committee meeting held November 30, 2023:

Held in conjunction with the Fall Representative Assembly, which included a virtual open hearing for input from delegates.

- The committee received a report on past and pending legislation given by the Government Relations Department.
- Government Relations Manager, Dan Ramos, gave a brief update and review of OEA's new Legislative Scorecard which will be revealed at the OEA Fall Representative Assembly.
- No new policy submissions were received.

Legislative Committee meeting of February 3, 2024:

The committee took nominations from the floor and conducted an election for Vice-Chairperson for 2024-2025. LeShun "Ship" Collins was re-elected to serve a one-year term beginning July 14, 2024.

The committee reviewed the status of past and pending legislation provided by OEA Government Relations staff.

- SB 162 – Academic Intervention Services
 - This is Chair Brenner's bill that would require public schools to provide intervention services to students who score at the lowest (limited) level on state achievement tests in either ELA or math.

Lobbyist, Robert Davis reported that OEA is currently collaborating with a legislator on a draft bill to move forward on issues adopted at the OEA Fall RA regarding Voucher Accountability – looking at anti-discrimination policies, financial accountability, and leveling the playing field on academic accountability.

Currently on the lookout for potential proposals in the capital budget or otherwise to steer state dollars to private schools for facilities, expanding classrooms and building new schools.

- HB 339 – Non-Chartered Educational Savings Account

- Seek to establish an Educational Savings Account Program for Non-Chartered Non-Public schools. Not to be mistaken, an educational savings account in this case is a voucher. OEA legislative policies oppose that provide public taxpayer dollars to pay for private school tuition.
- HCR 6 – Urge Congress – Repeal Windfall Elimination Provision
 - To urge Congress to repeal the Government Pension Offset (GPO) and the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP).
 - OEA supports full repeal of GPO and WEP which unfairly punishes public service by reducing the earned Social Security benefits of workers who also have a public pension in states like Ohio.
- SB 83 – The Higher Education “Destruction” Act
 - The bill seeks to make several changes to higher education, including provisions that: prohibit higher education employees from striking, require annual evaluations for faculty including evaluations by students, require universities to create a post-tenure review policy, make numerous changes to university mission statements and hiring practices, and seeks to address “controversial” matters, including the prohibition of any diversity, equity, and inclusion programs or trainings.
 - Largest attack on collective bargaining rights since SB 5. We are considering this a serious threat. We are working with We Are Ohio and other allies to defeat this bill.
- HB 68 – Gender Services for Minors, Single-Sex Sports Teams.
 - Eliminates gender transition services for minors, removing parents from the decision-making process.
 - Designates single-sex sports teams which prevents trans girls from participating in high school girls’ athletics.
 - The Governor vetoed the bill; the Ohio legislature overrode the veto.
 - OEA opposed this bill.
- SB 168 – Education Regulation Law Changes
 - Allow districts to employ non-licensed individuals as classroom teachers if they hold at least a master’s degree and complete an exam proscribed by the State Board.
 - The elimination of seniority as a preference in nonteaching staff reductions.
 - The elimination of supplemental contracts to teach classes outside of the normal school day.
 - Amendments eliminating the need for a senior professional educator or lead professional educator to hold at least a master’s degree.
 - OEA opposes this bill.
- HB 183 – Single-Sex Bathrooms
 - Requires public and chartered nonpublic schools, educational service centers (ESCs), and institutions of higher education to designate specified facilities for the exclusive use of students of

- either the male biological sex or the female biological sex.
 - OEA opposes this bill.
- HB 214 – School Policy on Staff Speech
 - Requires school districts and charter schools to adopt a policy setting forth expectations and standards for all professional staff members related to specific beliefs, affiliations, ideals, for principles concerning political movements, ideology, or social action.
 - There are concerns about the bill’s impact on the Professional Code of Conduct
 - Professional Conduct matters are better addressed in the Licensure Code of Professional Conduct for Ohio Educators adopted by the State Board of Education.
 - OEA opposes this bill.

Government Relations Manager, Dan Ramos gave the committee an update on the Citizens Not Politicians Amendment which will end gerrymandering by empowering citizens, not politicians, to draw fair districts using an open and transparent process.

- OEA has endorsed the ballot measure and is in the process of collecting signatures. This Amendment if passed will:
 - Create the 15-member Ohio Citizens Redistricting Commission made up of Democrat, Republican, and independent citizens who broadly represent the different geographic areas and demographics of the state.
 - Ban current or former politicians, political party officials and lobbyists from sitting on the Commission.
 - Require fair and impartial districts by making it unconstitutional to draw voting districts that discriminate against or favor any political party or individual politician.
 - Require the Commission to operate under an open and independent process.

The Committee completed Charge #3:

Evaluate, assess, and provide recommendations for the next steps in addressing OEA’s Legislative Priorities for the second half of the 135th General Assembly:

- Fully Fund the Fair School Funding Plan – this was incorporated into the budget this July and phased in years 3 and 4 of the plan. It will be up to the 136th General Assembly to give us the final phase of the plan.
- Recruit and Retain Qualified, Committed Educators for Every Public-School Student in Ohio – still seeing issues with unfilled positions. Especially with Special Education and Intervention Specialists. Working conditions and the feeling of not being appreciated were cited.
- End the Expansion of Private School Voucher Programs – holding private schools accountable and prohibiting the use of public tax dollars to fund private schools.

- Repeal Mandatory Student Retention Under the Third Grade Reading Guarantee – Completed and included in the budget – HB 33.
- Support Student and Staff Wellbeing – Wellness Grants are accessible.
 - Governor DeWine has made this a focus this year to focus on addressing mental health and addiction issues.
- Public Education Matters Initiative – Student behavior issues was a issue identified by members when asked to list top issues facing educators and public schools last year.
- Meaningful professional learning.
- Protect the Voice of Educators – Support Unions and Defend Collective Bargaining Rights
- Defending the rights and dignity of students.
- Operating standards regarding the delivery of service for special education.

The Committee completed Charge #4:

Discuss and provide recommendations for the formation of an OEA member legislative advocacy training program.

- Dan Ramos is working along with his GR team and Assistant Executive Director Airica Clay on Charge #4. Other training programs outside of OEA have been explored. They are currently working with Nick Gurich, Manager of EPRMA to help with designing and building the training program.
- Overall highlights of the program are to:
- Increase member awareness of State and Federal legislative processes.
- Increase member engagement of their own legislators to build relationships and develop capacity to urge legislators to support OEA's positions on active bills, policies, or other legislative matters.
- Develop a cohort of self-identified member legislative advocates (like the member organizer program) that OEA GR can turn to lead back home legislative engagement, testify, or provide written comments on active bills, and assist in organizing their colleagues into the process.
- Develop a train-the-trainer model to help support OEA District Associations and Affinity Groups that engage their own colleagues in legislative advocacy.
- Work with Organizing & Member Engagement Department to identify members who may be interested in participating in the program as an OEA member legislative advocate.
- Work with EPRMA, explore the use of various training tools and modes, to provide training to members.

The idea is to have a four-module learning curriculum which may be used at the Summer Leadership Academy.

Module 1: Understanding the Legislative Process and Political Landscape in Ohio

- Training Components:
 - Understanding the Legislative Basics
 - Role of Advocacy in Shaping Legislation

- Current Political Climate and Key Decision Makers
- Identifying Potential Allies and Opponents

Module 2: Building Relationships with Elected Officials

- Training Components:
 - Identifying the Right Policymakers and Key Staff
 - Building Trusting Relationships through Storytelling
 - Effective Communication Strategies
 - Developing an Outreach Strategy and Tracking Progress

Module 3: Advocacy Tools, Tactics, and Resources

- Training Components:
 - Legislative Research (how to research a bill)
 - Lobbying Techniques
 - Testifying and Engaging Committees
 - Public Awareness Campaigns and Grassroots Mobilization (available tools)

Module 4: Developing and Implementing a Local Legislative Advocacy Strategy

- Training Components:
 - Identifying Advocacy Issues, Priorities, and Issue Prioritization
 - Determining Target Audiences and Messaging
 - Member Engagement, Grassroots Advocacy and Building Local Alliances
 - Developing a Timeline for Engagement, Advocacy, and Tracking Progress
 - Evaluating Progress Toward Objective (next steps)

For each training module, resources might include the following:

- A trainer's guide (for train the trainer purposes).
- Relevant PowerPoint(s) and other presentation materials.
- Opportunities for engagement or take-home activities to assess skills.
- Learning activities (e.g., how a bill becomes a law board game).
- Feedback mechanism for both evaluation of the training, and implementation of program or engagement with legislators.

The goal is to have some of these components up and running by the next school year.