

The Ohio Coalition for **Equity & Adequacy** Of School Funding

William L. Phillis, Executive Director, 100 S. Third St., Columbus, Ohio 43215 (614) 228-6540, (614) 228-6542 fax, e-mail ohioeanda@aol.com

July 11, 2002

Dear Governor,

Ohio's economic and demographic health is failing. Ohio's ranking among the states is declining in personal income, educational attainment and the capacity to maintain and attract persons of employment age. The documented decline in these critical areas has been long-standing and continues today. The data regarding Ohio's decline cry out for leadership that fashions and achieves solutions. You have a peerless opportunity to halt the decline and lead Ohio to its former splendor and beyond. To deny the decline or to sacrifice Ohio's viable future on the alter of political expediency by inaction is indefensible.

A prime contributor to Ohio's failing economic and demographic health is the lack of several essential education and tax policy ingredients. The perennial under-investment in public education is the main culprit. The public university tuition rate in Ohio is outrageously high. Ohio's investment in public higher education is in the bottom quintile among the states. Likewise, Ohio's investment in K-12 public education per thousand dollars of personal income is near the bottom, ranking 38th among the states.

School closings due to financial reasons in the 1970s and the state-imposed loan fund of the 1980s and 1990s to keep schools open were symbolic of the K-12 public school funding problems in those years. The three Supreme Court rulings since 1997 that Ohio's elementary and secondary school funding statutes are unconstitutional should not have been unexpected. Numerous school funding studies since 1976 have all shown that Ohio's system of school funding is inadequate and inequitable. The Court's decisions reflect a myriad of problems, such as:

1. Overemphasis on property tax
2. Unfunded mandates
3. Lack of strict academic standards (which include standards of opportunity as well as outcomes)
4. School districts forced to borrow to meet ordinary expenses
5. Lack of a statewide school facilities assessment
6. Inadequate school foundation program in which no relationship exists between the per pupil support level and the cost of providing the essential learning resources inherent in a thorough and efficient system
7. Phantom revenue syndrome in the funding formula which results in school districts being shortchanged

The Supreme Court's decisions requiring a complete systematic overhaul of the school funding system not only comport to the Constitutional requirement, but also are a common sense approach to revitalizing Ohio. However, these legal and common sense rulings have been essentially ignored in favor of making cosmetic changes. The structure of the school funding system and the results – inadequacy and inequity-remain unchanged. The complete systematic overhaul should be addressed not only because the Court ordered it but also because it is a step in the right direction for Ohio.

The Court clarified that the responsibility of ensuring a thorough and efficient system of common schools falls upon the state and that “thorough and efficient” is a standard of high quality. Governor, the onus is on you. Ensuring adequate school funding cannot be delegated to local school districts. You have this unique and awesome responsibility to lead Ohio to a resolution of the long-standing school funding problem.

High quality public education is a democratic imperative. The vitality of the social and economic order is largely a function of the availability of high quality educational opportunities to all school children. Even without a Constitutional mandate to provide a thorough and efficient system of public common schools, it is requisite that state officials provide for such in the interest of the public good.

Adequate investment in public education is imperative both for the benefit of each Ohioan and for the revitalization of the economy and the standard of living in Ohio. You may wish to take the following steps toward an adequate investment in Ohio's public education system:

1. Commission one or more school finance experts to work with panels of teachers and school administrators to identify the essential learning resources required for all elementary and secondary schools.
2. Draft standards of opportunity based on the work products of the panels and hold extensive public hearings throughout Ohio to refine the standards.
3. Provide leadership for the adoption of the standards of opportunity via Administrative Code and/or legislative Statutes.
4. With the assistance of the school finance experts, cost out the standards of opportunity and establish a per pupil base support level for regular, special education, gifted, vocation and disadvantaged students and develop a school funding distribution formula that has no “phantom” revenue and is fully funded.
5. Commission a panel of experts to conduct a tax equity study and make recommendations for changes in the local and state tax structures. The new tax structure must ensure adequate funding for a high quality K-12 public education program and meet the demands of other state services including high education.

The Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding has the capacity to provide assistance in reforming the school funding system and, hereby, pledges its cooperation.

Sincerely,

William Phillis