

Blue Ribbon Commission Meeting Minutes

Date: April 15, 2025

Time: 10:00 a.m.

Location: Erie County Office Building Chambers, 247 Columbus Avenue, Sandusky

Welcoming Remarks – Co-Chairman Mike Parker

The meeting was called to order by Co-Chairman **Mike Parker**. Roll Call was taken, with Mr. Kelly Moon being excused. An attendance sheet was signed by audience members present.

Approval of Minutes from April 8, 2025 – Topic of Discussion: Public Transportation

A motion to approve the minutes that were distributed electronically was made by Ms. Crescimano and seconded by Mr. Forster. The motion carried unanimously.

Purpose of the Meeting

Mr. Mike Parker (Blue Ribbon Commission) welcomed attendees and introduced the primary focus of the meeting: exploring opportunities for collaboration among school districts to improve cost efficiency in education in Erie County. Mr. Parker explained the need to reduce the tax burden on Erie County residents but the importance of maintaining services. He mentioned that school districts receive 66% of the tax revenue and it is incumbent of us to look at ways to reduce this burden.

Mr. Parker introduced **Dr. James Tatman (Superintendent of Huron City Schools)** who gave a brief overview of his education background. He stated the following regional collaborations currently taking place:

- Transportation – several students in Huron Schools attend a school for the blind in Columbus. They collaborated with another school district to share transportation services for these students to travel to Columbus for school
- Bus Garage – mechanics communicate with other district mechanics. If there is a part needed for a bus, they will order the part, borrow a bus from another district, and then replace the part to that school district once it comes in. This process reduces the time busses are out of service.

Dr. Tatman introduced **Mr. Dennis Honkala (Assistant Executive Director of Ohio Schools Council)**. Mr. Honkala stated that Ohio Schools Council is a non-profit organization that started in 1986. The Ohio Schools Council operates under Ohio Revised Code Section 167, which states in part:

“That governing bodies of any two or more counties, municipal corporations, townships special districts, school districts, or other political subdivisions may enter into an agreement with each other, or with the governing bodies of any counties, municipal corporations, townships special districts, school districts or other political subdivisions of any other state to the extent that laws of such other state permit, for establishment of a regional council consisting of such political subdivisions.”

The Ohio Schools Council provides financial savings through group purchasing of products/ services (paper, pencils, and toilet paper), provides operational support and networking opportunities to entities. There are currently 320 members (entities) of the Ohio Schools Council with a \$2.3 million budget. All School Districts in Erie County are members except for one. Mr. Honkala stated that one of the largest contracts they have is for electricity and natural gas. In 2024, this contract saved Huron City Schools \$186,000, by contracting with Ohio Schools Council.

Ms. Andrea Smith (NorthPoint Educational Services Center (ESC) Superintendent) explained that Educational Service Centers are designed to be a shared service model. They employ over 400 and service over 500 students. Ways they collaborate include:

- Huron-Erie School Employee Insurance Association (HESE) – self-funded insurance with 13 school districts in consortium. Helps provide lower cost premiums for school districts.
- Bay Area Gas Consortium – 25 school districts involved, which assists with saving on natural gas.
- Northern Ohio Educational Computer Association (NOECA) – 49 school districts involved, seven districts in Erie County. This consortium provides cost efficient computer services.

Mr. Jeff Krabill (Blue Ribbon Commission) stated that, as part of this Commission, we have researched and identified important information regarding each School District in Erie County:

- Enrollment figures from 2016 to current
- Number of Administrators from 2016 -2024
- General Fund and Capital Fund Carryover
- State funding vs. local funding from 2016 – 2024

This information will aid in the “white paper” recommendation that the Blue Ribbon Commission will turn in at the end of June to the Erie County Commissioners.

Mr. Tom Tucker (Blue Ribbon Commission) reviewed the questions that have been posted on the agenda:

Review

- Hospitalization costs acceptable? Interest in pooling?
 - Perkins School District- along with 13 other districts, utilize HESE (Huron Erie School Employee Insurance Association)
 - Allows districts to buy insurance in bulk to keep costs down
 - Prevents competition among school district employees
 - Sandusky School District – self insured
 - Receive better rates due to size of district
 - District designs its own benefits plan

- Transportation among the School Districts (high costs, need for drivers etc.) what works? what doesn't?
 - Margaretta School District – receives grants for transportation
 - Collaborates with other districts for transporting
 - Utilizes Ohio Schools Council with purchase of busses
 - Receive volume discounts
 - Diesel fuel purchased in bulk
 - Bus routing software is often used to make routes more efficient
 - Bus drivers an additional challenge
 - Increase wages to attract drivers
 - Bus drivers may not want part-time some may want full-time work
 - Level of requirements to attain license is difficult, per state regulations
 - Maintenance of busses – underbody wash system
 - Collaborate on having one neutral facility that all districts can utilize
 - Could double the life of buses
 - Could contract out with other entities to use the underbody wash as well for revenue
- Are alternatives to costly capital improvements being actively pursued?
 - Ohio Schools Council – pre-negotiate contracts related to concrete, paving and some capital improvements i.e. roofs
 - Perkins Schools – active with Perkins Township to cost share on various improvements
- Expenditures per student per district? The following reports were provided to Commission on each School District in Erie County:
 - Detailed School Finance Payment Report (SFPR)
 - Enrollment figures from 2016-2025 (CUPP Report)
 - Number of Administrators from 2016-2024 (CUPP Report)
 - General Fund and Capital Fund Carryover (Audit Reports)
 - State Funding vs. local funding (CUPP Report)
- What administrative functions are feasible to share?
 - School Treasurers
 - administrative staff
 - School social workers (possibly go through ESC)
 - Foreign language and AP teachers

Ms. Nikki Spriggs (audience member) noted that she is a retired School Treasurer and currently provides consulting work as a School Treasurer two days per week at a school district. She believes it will be difficult to find knowledgeable individuals to share administrative positions.

Mr. Chris Gasteier (audience member) stated as a former educator, he cautions sharing certain personnel, i.e. social workers. Students become comfortable with certain staff and it could affect them if these positions were taken away. Mr. Parker agreed, stating that, the safety and children are most important.

Mr. Daniel Rambler (Sandusky City Schools Superintendent) – stressed that School Districts continue to be restricted by state budget. They have had to readjust how funds are being used by finding other avenues on the operational side, without sacrificing staff.

- Snow & ice removal, contract or in-house? In-house cost?
- Fleet Maintenance, who performs it, where?
 - Perkins Schools – consortium with Perkins Township and Margaretta Schools
 - Shared cost in purchase of brine equipment
 - Township crews assist plowing high traffic school buildings
 - Margaretta Schools – maintenance on all equipment performed in-house
 - Sandusky Schools – maintenance on all equipment performed in-house
- Review budget performance indicators
 - FY24 Cupp Report shows that Erie County has lost the enrollment equivalent of one School District in the past eight years

Mr. Caleb Stidham (Erie County Treasurer) stated one of the jobs of the Treasurer is to collect real estate taxes. From his perspective, he has seen a crisis over the last six month with property being re-evaluated. With this re-evaluation, it has brought an additional \$10 million on un-voted increases that mostly benefits the School Districts. While the School Districts are seeing a growth in their revenue, it is casting a burden on the taxpayers. Another burden on the taxpayers is the fact that almost every School District in Erie County, besides Sandusky, has had some massive infrastructure upgrade that has gone to the ballot.

The reports provided to the Commission show that the cost per pupil has increased, yet also shows drastic increases in General Fund revenue carryover. Mr. Stidham believes this should be a larger community discussion. It is a challenging circumstance and there needs to be an innovative way to regionalize.

Ms. Spriggs stated that school district income does not grow and relies on state and local funding. The need to keep a large carryover balance is to ensure that the day-to-day bills can be covered. With the State continuing to cut school budgets, that is when schools are forced to go to the ballot.

Mr. Stidham expressed reality of needing to address these issues now, as a community, before the State has to decide for us. Erie County needs a long-term plan that will not require the taxpayers to continue the burden of funding the schools.

Mr. Tucker noted this same discussion was being had about school districts in 1975 and something needs to change.

Mr. Ben Ohlemacher (Kelley's Island School Superintendent) stated that all School Districts feel it is important to protect the most vulnerable (children and older adults). He believes that the school districts have been very cognizant of the citizens of Erie County, especially the ones on fixed incomes.

Mr. Krabill noted he has been away from the School board for several years, but has a strong concern regarding the following:

- Potential for state funding cuts
- School Districts creating an increase in property taxes
- Operating levies difficult to pass
- Schools need to get creative on ways to do more with less
- Need to have a plan in place if funding cuts take place at the State level

Ms. Smith (North Point ESC) stated that the Superintendents in Erie County have monthly meetings, to ensure they are all being good stewards of tax dollars and do their best to advocate for the students.

Mr. Rambler (Sandusky City School Superintendent) stressed that each school district is unique and Sandusky has meaningful financial conversations. Each district has a School Board that plays a significant role in decisions that are made.

Mr. Tucker thanked everyone for attending the meeting and for their participation.

Meeting Summary

Mr. Parker provided a summary of key points from today's meeting:

- Health Care insurance - not a concern. Many in consortium
- Transportation – possibility for additional shared services
- Bus Drivers – help push legislation to make it not so restrictive to get a license
- Review number of administrative staff at each school district.
- Concern that enrollment numbers are dropping
- Possibility to share specialty teachers, i.e. AP and foreign language
- Superintendents meeting monthly to encourage conversations on what can be better

Adjournment

Mr. Krabill reminded the Blue Ribbon Commission that the next work session is scheduled for next Tuesday, April 22, 2025 at 9:00 a.m., before our next regularly scheduled meeting.

Next Meeting: Scheduled for Tuesday, April 22, 2025 at Office Building Chambers,
247 Columbus Avenue, 3rd Floor Chambers

Topic Discussion: **Entity Administrative Staffing** (Human Resources and employee benefits)

Facilitators: Mr. Tucker, Ms. Crescimano, and Ms. Balconi Ghezzi

A motion to adjourn was made by Mr. Tucker and seconded by Mr. Krabill. The motion carried unanimously.