

Advocating for You at STRS

Thanks to the people who represent all of you, the September meeting of the State Teachers Retirement System was a successful one for OEA and all of its members, and it was due to quick and effective action by your fellow OEA members. I want to tell you what happened, and why it was important, and make a plea for action on behalf of all our members.

The Result We Wanted

First, let me tell you the positive outcome of the day. The STRS and Health Care Advocates Member Education and Engagement Campaign and Proposal was adopted unanimously by the STRS Board on September 15. It was subsequently endorsed by the OEA Executive Committee the following Saturday. This campaign and proposal, a part of the HCA and OEA-endorsed STRS Strategic Plan for Health Care, will be carried out in the next two months. Members everywhere in the state will be asked to give their opinions and guidance on a plan to change the law so that a dedicated revenue stream for retiree health care can be created to sustain a health care benefit for both current and future retirees. More detail around this proposal will be featured in the October issue of *Ohio Schools* and in additional future communications.

Why We Testified

OEA has been a key leader in the Health Care Advocates (HCA), a coalition of employees, employers, and retirees who are members of the State Teachers Retirement System. Working in collaboration with the STRS Board and staff over the last couple of years, this group of professional organizations have worked hard on behalf of their individual and collective constituencies. At this time when we are finally ready to craft a legislative proposal with the approval of our memberships, the face of the STRS Board has changed significantly. No longer is there an active majority of contributing members on the Board, and concern that the three new statutory members created by S.B. 133

-- "investment experts" appointed by the Governor, President of the Senate, and Speaker of the House -- might have a more narrow interest than those Board members elected by the participants in the system led to some very effective political action in September that I hope you will build upon in the coming months.

Who Said What

Having been made aware that the STRS Board would be entertaining a motion that will shape the future of retiree health care benefits for our members, 18 active and retired OEA members composed testimony that stressed the importance of the compact between STRS and public school educators for health care and retirement benefits and public policy that protects it, the support for STRS's continual efforts toward cost containment and member education through their strategic plan, and enthusiasm for the process developed for surveying members and employers. They also addressed the importance of the 35-year benefit and the peril of shifting to a defined contribution plan for health care.

What Happened

They made a huge impact. STRS Board members and staff alike commented on the power of their professional, articulate, and passionate testimony. The stark contrast between these OEA members and too many of the usual participants in the public input portion of the meeting (who have launched personal insults, unreasonable demands, and angry diatribes for the past couple of years) was a vivid one. A positive unintended consequence of this testimony by these professional educators was the huge morale boost it gave to a beleaguered STRS staff and Board.

Concern that a new STRS Board might consider such destructive ideas such as repealing S.B. 190 (which includes the enhanced 35-year benefit and other gains for all members of the system) and moving away from a subsidized defined health care benefit for current and future retirees were allayed for the time being. At the end

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of the day, everyone seemed to be on the same page moving forward, as reflected by the Board's unanimous vote and supportive comments from everyone in the audience -- including previous naysayers.

Who Did It

Franklin County local presidents organized the active members who participated in the testimony, and the OEA-R Advisory Committee provided the retiree testimony. All worked in concert at very short notice to support the work of the HCA and STRS. OEA Vice-President Patricia Frost-Brooks was there to provide support for our members as they represented our interests. With the assistance of OEA and HCA staff, I also testified and coordinated the testimonies.

What We Need From You

Now it is time for leaders and members from other parts of the state to come forward and help the new Board understand that these concerns really do represent everyone. Please make plans to attend or send representatives to future STRS Board meetings to provide either testimony or presence or both. If you will keep us informed, Pat and I will help with the logistics of your participation and development of testimony. Please email both of us to indicate your interest.

Here are the board meeting dates for the rest of the year. Please try to attend the November and December meetings especially.

Nov. 17 and 18

Dec. 8 and 9

Jan. 19 and 20

Feb. 16 and 17

Mar. 9 and 10

April 20 and 21

May 18 and 19

June 15 and 16

Public participation is held at 1 p.m. on the Thursday meeting day. Please make it a priority to ensure an OEA presence at these meetings. Let Pat and me know how we can be of assistance. Thanks!

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