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## **PANEL SEEKS TIMELINE EXTENSION FOR SCHOOL HEALTH CARE REVIEW; EDUCATION INTERESTS CONTINUE CHALLENGE**

A state panel charged with reviewing options to pool school district employees for health care coverage decided Wednesday to ask lawmakers for an extension to the deadline under which it must complete its work.

The request from the School Employees Health Care Board came at the panel's first meeting. Down the hall in the Riffe Center, members of the education community held a news conference to continue a challenge to the process.

Dublin City Schools Treasurer Chris Mohr noted that the board started its deliberations several months after lawmakers expected action to begin. Given the delay, he said, it "seems unreasonable" that the board would be expected to finish its work on the original time frame.

"It seems to cry out that if we're going to do something of value, these timelines are pretty helter-skelter," he said.

Stephen Loeb, an Ohio State University professor emeritus, agreed with the suggestion. "We have some really significant decisions to make," he said, noting that having an appropriate amount of time is crucial. He also argued that board should operate in "total transparency" and its work should be open to the public.

Mr. Loeb, a former member of the Upper Arlington school board, was later elected to serve as the board's chair and Mr. Mohr was elected vice chair.

The board, established with the goal of producing cost savings while improving coverage for employees and their families, asked Department of Administrative Services staff to prepare a revised timeline for presentation to the legislature.

Key education interests continued to argue Tuesday that the board is operating in violation of law because its members were appointed after statutory deadlines.

"You have accepted a challenging and controversial assignment," the Hands Off Our Health Care Coalition wrote to the board's members Wednesday. "While we have no doubt that the members of the School Employees Health Care Board have only the best intentions, the members we represent want no part of a mandatory statewide health insurance plan."

The group includes the Ohio AFL-CIO, AFSCME Ohio Council 8, the Ohio Association of Public School Employees, SEIU District 1199, the Ohio Federation of Teachers, the Ohio Conference of American Association of University Professors and the Columbus and Akron education associations. It argued that the board needs to have independent information on the potential impact.

"At this point in time, there is no reason for any school employee in Ohio to believe that this plan...will be efficient or protect the health and well-being of themselves or their families," the group said.

The board also discussed, but delayed action on a decision about whether it would use the firm of Watson Wyatt to perform related studies. DAS hired the consultant in advance of the board's first meeting, but members decided they wanted more time to review the existing contract before deciding whether they would hire their own consultant.

The education groups raised concerns about the selection of the consultant, suggesting that Governor Bob Taft's administration had usurped the board's authority by contracting with the firm.