

Dealing with unpaid fees and fines

by Megan Greulich
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With graduation right around the corner, districts may be wondering how to deal with students who have unpaid fees and fines. A solution to this problem can be included in your school board policies dealing with both graduating seniors and students who are not yet ready to graduate. But districts should understand the limits before drafting policy language to deal with the problem. Let's consider the options.

Ohio Revised Code Section (RC) 3313.642 provides that districts may adopt policy language stating that grades and credits may be withheld for students who have unpaid fees and fines. Districts implementing this provision should add language stating this to their policy dealing with student fees. For districts using OSBA's policy services, this language should appear in policy JN, *Student Fees, Fines and Charges*.

The RC provision only states that grades and credits may be withheld and does not extend beyond those two items. In applying the provision, districts would issue transcripts, simply redacting grades and credits from them.

It is important that your district adopts relevant policy language so students know this may occur. This provision applies to all students, not just graduating seniors. To supplement this language more specifically for graduating seniors, districts should look to policies dealing with graduation exercises.

In dealing with graduating seniors, the district may prevent students from participating in the graduation ceremony if any financial obligations to the district remain unpaid. However, there is an important distinction here. The district can prevent the student from walking in the graduation ceremony, but must still award a diploma to the student. So, like grades and credits, the student's diploma may not be withheld as a consequence of unpaid fees and fines. For districts using OSBA's policy services, this language appears in policy IKFB, *Graduation Exercises*. The language simply states that payment of all financial obligations to the district must be made as a prerequisite to the student's participation in the graduation ceremony.

Questions about participation in the graduation ceremony are an especially hot topic this time of year. Students should be made aware that

participation is a privilege, not a right, and that they may be prohibited from participating for various reasons. The district's graduation exercises policy may, as a prerequisite to participating in the graduation ceremony, require students to have paid all financial debts to the district, satisfactorily completed any district disciplinary obligations and refrained from misconduct prior to the graduation ceremony. Regardless of the district's participation requirements, it is essential that the policy be clear on what is expected of students. It is even more important to ensure that all staff members in the district are aware that while prohibiting students from participating in the graduation ceremony is acceptable, withholding a student's diploma is not.

Withholding grades and credits and prohibiting students with unpaid fees and fines from participating in the graduation ceremony are two effective ways to encourage students to pay their fees and fines in a timely manner. It is a good idea to take a look at your district's policies regarding student fees and fines and graduation exercises to ensure that you are dealing with this issue effectively and legally.

Another reason for Ohio public schools' fiscal woes

by Dr. Robert L. Zorn
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Editor's note: The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Ohio School Boards Association. OSBA supports charters schools sponsored by public school districts.

The economy? Yes. Levy failures? Yes. Cuts in school aid? Yes. Unfunded state mandates? Yes.

While all of these contribute to the financial distress of Ohio's public school districts, something else is

adding to their fiscal woes: the amount of state tax dollars deducted each year from their budgets and allocated to Ohio's for-profit charter schools.

If the state's economic revenue pie is only so big and a sizable piece of the elementary and secondary school slice is diverted to charter schools, then there's less financial pie remaining for public schools and charter schools operated by public school districts.

For instance, let's look at state tax dollars being distributed to charter schools in Mahoning County this year, shown in the chart. These figures include funding to all charter schools in

the county, both charter schools sponsored by a public board of education, as well as charter schools run by for-profit companies.

The \$25,539,904 charter school support deducted from the county's public school districts' state aid is a significant loss in revenue for those schools. This loss amounts to 15.59% of the state aid set aside for the county's public school districts.

The financial impact of the funds being diverted to charter schools is even more striking when you look closely at examples of how it affects several individual school districts: