

House Primary and Secondary Education Committee

House Bill (HB) 409 Proponent Testimony

Thursday, January 23, 2020

Chairman Jones, Vice Chair Manchester, Ranking Member Robinson and Members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee. I am grateful for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on HB 409. My name is Marie Hanna, and I am the superintendent of the Ohio Connections Academy (OCA), a virtual school that serves 4800 Kindergarten through 12th grade students throughout Ohio.

While OCA students have many accomplishments, a few highlights from this past and current year include having 160 students participating in CTE and the College Credit Plus Program. Our school has two national merit scholar semifinalists. The members of our 2019 graduating class earned more than \$5 million dollars in scholarships and awards. Our students are accepted to a variety of 2 and 4 year colleges. One of our 2019 graduates was accepted into Princeton. One of our 2013 graduates is a Fulbright Scholar- her specialty is Physics.

As you all know, virtual schools in Ohio have been subject to significant scrutiny over the past several years due to abuses in the enrollment and student accounting practices of the former largest e-school operator in the state. This scrutiny was earned and fortunately, legislative and regulatory changes were passed in response to these abuses.

My staff and I, as well as the OCA governing board, have always adhered to a very high standard in all student accounting and enrollment processes. We do not want to receive taxpayer dollars for any student that is not attending AND fully engaged in the OCA academic program.

I am happy and proud to say that OCA has been the highest performing virtual school in Ohio for each of the last ten years and each of our FTE audits have gone smoothly. Ohio Connections Academy has always implement processes that track students for participation and performance and we take pride in having established high-standards in data integrity and accountability.

But there is room to improve the way e-schools handle the small percentage of students enrolled but not engaging, and we need legislative support. This is what HB 409 is all about and I applaud the bill sponsor for his leadership on this issue. A strong engagement policy law, such as what HB 409 proposes, is a necessary addition to the student accounting changes that have recently been put in place.

Here's why I say that:

Every school, whether it be virtual or brick and mortar, faces the problem of the unengaged student. In a brick and mortar environment this is the kid who sits at the back of the classroom with his head in his phone, doesn't do the assignments and doesn't turn in homework. In a virtual school this is the student who doesn't consistently log into the learning system, doesn't engage with teachers, and falls behind in lesson completion.

Although all types of schools experience this same problem, the challenge in dealing with it is quite different. In a brick and mortar school, as long as the student shows up, the school has the ability to engage in many types of interventions. In a virtual school, an unengaged student often doesn't respond to phone calls, emails, messages, or any or all other efforts to communicate.

Currently the virtual school's hands are tied until the student misses 72 consecutive hours of instruction. Unfortunately, students are able to work around this policy by ensuring that the hours missed are not consecutive. OCA needs another tool in its toolbox to deal with chronically disengaged students. OCA needs the option to disenroll this type of student.

Here's how HB 409 would work in practice:

Each virtual school is required to establish an "engagement policy" that the school can trigger when a student starts falling behind. The policy specifies thresholds and escalating actions the school will take, and if the student and family fails to engage adequately despite repeated efforts by the teachers and school, the final step is the student can be withdrawn from the virtual school and essentially benched for the remainder of the academic year from attending another e-school.

This will ensure that virtual schools do not receive funding for chronically unengaged students. Of course, the withdrawn students will not be just left to fend for themselves; the law requires the school to counsel the student on options going forward. Also, a student engagement policy would prevent students from jumping from school to school. Research shows that every time a student changes schools a dramatic amount of learning is lost.

Without an engagement policy in place, a virtual school's hands are tied when a student starts falling behind and fails to respond to the school's ongoing outreach. I think we can all agree that it is not best for students to languish in a virtual school, if it is not a good fit for them, losing precious time in their educational process.

Ohio Connections Academy has a track record of being careful stewards of state education funds, and we take our responsibility to use these scarce dollars to effectively serve students seriously.

In our view, a robust engagement policy is the necessary missing piece that will make sure virtual schools do not receive funds for students who are not fully engaged in the educational process.

I look forward to being a part of the discussion as the details of this bill are hammered out, and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.