

House Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education
House Bill 166 Testimony
Lisa Gray, Ohio Excels
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Chairman Cupp, Chairman Patterson, and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on the As-Introduced version of House Bill 166, the state's biennial budget. My name is Lisa Gray, and I am the president of Ohio Excels.

Ohio Excels is a new business coalition focused on helping to improve the educational outcomes for all Ohio students. Our focus on education includes early childhood, K-12 and post-secondary education experiences. And, as part of that, we are committed to working with the broader business community, policymakers, educators and other community leaders to support our students, educators and schools.

Overall, Ohio Excels is pleased with the investments found in Governor DeWine's budget proposals. In the interest of time, however, I would like to highlight just a select few proposals. I will review them using the lens I mentioned earlier: Supporting Students, Supporting Educators and Supporting Schools.

Supporting Students

We're encouraged to see the Governor's commitment to supporting students, from birth throughout their educational career. You can see this alignment with the increased funding for home visit and books from birth programs through increased OCOG funding and flexibility for purchasing textbooks. In the primary and secondary education portion of the budget, Ohio Excels would like to note its support of the Governor's proposals related to wraparound services and industry credentials.

Wraparound Services

Ohio Excels supports Governor DeWine's proposal to provide additional funding outside of the school funding formula to provide wraparound supports for students. While all districts and charter schools receive student wellness and success funds, the funding is wisely targeted to communities with high poverty. Those are the communities that need it the most. Schools, working in partnership with community members, have the flexibility to develop services and initiatives to meet local needs. We encourage our schools and districts to maximize these resources with the other state investments in the Departments of Health, Mental Health, ODJFS, and the like to ensure our students are better prepared to learn and thrive.

Industry Credentials

Students who leave high school with an in-demand industry credential are set up for success. Even if students go to college immediately after high school, credentials can open doors to employers during the college years and ensure that Ohio's workforce is prepared for tomorrow's economy. Ohio Excels strongly supports the focus that the administration gives to industry credentials in its budget proposal. In the primary and secondary sections of the budget, there are two proposals that will increase the number and quality of credentials earned in Ohio schools.

The Innovative Workforce Incentive Program would offer schools a \$1,250 bonus for each qualifying credential earned by a student in the district. Beyond getting administrators' attention, these funds can be invested back into the credential programs to increase access, acquire specialized equipment and train more instructors. This program also includes \$4.5 million for schools to develop credentialing programs, with priority given to schools that create senior-year programs. Ohio Excels supports this proposal and we believe it will help encourage more students to pursue a career path and prepare them for success after high school.

The budget also includes \$8 million in each fiscal year to pay for the cost of high school students' credentialing exam or journeyman certification. Some of these exams cost over \$100 and can be a barrier preventing our low-income students from receiving a valuable credential. While Ohio Excels supports this proposal, we would recommend two additions. First, we believe that the state should prioritize funding for schools and districts with high enrollment of low-income students. Second, we believe that all juniors and seniors should be notified of this benefit, not just students currently in career-technical programs. This may help attract more students to career technical education.

Supporting Educators

As we have heard many times, other than parents, a teacher has the greatest impact on students' achievement. It is critical that we support our educators so they are able to provide all Ohio students with opportunities for deep teaching and learning. To that end, the Governor's proposal includes investments to ensure our students have highly effective educators in all Ohio classrooms.

Teach for America

The Governor's budget includes \$2 million to increase recruitment and training for Teach for America in Ohio. This will result in at least 350 new teaching corps members and serve an additional five school districts by fiscal year 2021. Ohio Excels supports the expansion of Teach for America and the additional funding in the budget. Teach for America recruits diverse, high-performing talent to enter the classroom. They are already working in Cincinnati, Cleveland, Lorain and Dayton, and we look forward to Teach for America helping more students in our hardest to staff schools and districts.

Computer Science Training for Teachers

Today's economy is fueled by technology. Employers are looking for more people who specialize in computer science and are expecting more computer literacy from all other candidates. However, many schools do not currently have instruction in computer science. A major cause for this is the lack of qualified computer science instructors. The Governor's budget includes funding to reimburse the costs of computer science training and credentialing. Ohio Excels supports this investment to help better prepare our students with the skills they need for success. However, one way to improve this proposal would be to include a time-limited commitment from recipients that they will continue to serve as teachers and not pursue technology-based employment outside of the classroom.

College Credit Plus Credentialing for High School Teachers

Ohio Excels believes that more students should have access to post-secondary education and that that education should be affordable. College Credit Plus achieves both of those goals by allowing students to get a head start on their college education at no or minimal cost to them. This is why Ohio Excels supports the Governor's proposal for educating and credentialing additional teachers so they are qualified to provide college instruction in high school. This will help our students in schools that have limited access to higher education institutions and may encourage a more diverse population of Ohio students to pursue College Credit Plus opportunities.

Supporting Schools

Ohio is blessed with many great schools and districts, but we need to do more to ensure all our schools provide the highest-quality education experiences for our students, starting in early childhood. There are a number of proposals and investments in the budget to advance this belief.

Early Childhood and Step Up to Quality

Ohio Excels applauds the financial commitment the Governor's budget makes to increasing the quality of early childcare providers. The Step Up to Quality program – the state's system for developing and rating high-quality providers – has ambitious goals. This includes the goal of having all public funds go to providers earning three or more stars in the rating system by 2025. The budget's investment in the quality of programs will help Ohio achieve this goal. However, moving forward, the state must also focus on increasing access to high-quality early childhood education experiences for the students who need it the most.

Quality Charter School Support

Ohio Excels wants all students to be in a high-quality school, whether that's a traditional public school or a public charter school. There is perhaps no more important decision for a parent than the school their child attends. And all parents should have the opportunity to choose the public school that best meets the individual needs of their child. Traveling the state, I have seen some truly outstanding charter schools working with low-income students and achieving great results. This budget includes a provision that rewards the highest-performing charter schools with additional funding. Ohio Excels strongly supports this proposal. It will allow high-performing charter schools in Ohio to potentially expand and replicate, and it will help attract quality charter providers in other states to Ohio. Every child that attends a public school, whether it's a traditional district school or a charter school, deserves to be supported fairly by our tax dollars.

While we support this proposal, we also believe it is just a start. The Fordham Institute recently released a report showing the funding disparities between charters and their district peers. Charter schools often receive thousands less in funding for the same students. If this funding gap were closed for all charters, we may have more high-quality options for Ohio's students and families.

Academic Distress Commissions and School Improvement

Helping the lowest-performing schools and districts is one of the biggest challenges in education policy. Ohio's model of Academic Distress Commissions has been around for many years, and it has not yielded the results policymakers and the public were looking to achieve. The Governor's budget includes language, based on a report by State Superintendent Paolo DeMaria, that would dramatically change how the state approaches its lowest-performing districts. While we applaud the continued focus on intervening in our most challenges schools and districts, Ohio Excels is concerned about elements of the language currently in the bill.

We believe the current proposal gives too much control and responsibility to the position of State Superintendent and does not afford the broader community a significant voice in the local decisions. This is by no means a criticism of our current Superintendent. While it is good to have flexibility in approaches, we believe that there are too many models included in the proposal and there is no direction or guidance on when a certain model is appropriate and in what circumstances. For example, if a district receives an overall grade of "F" for five years, there appears to be no specific consequence for that district.

There are several other legislative proposals currently being considered in the House and the Senate. While Ohio Excels has not developed a proposal, we have developed a set of guiding principles that we believe each plan should include:

- The state should do more to identify low-performing school districts that are trending downward and provide additional supports and interventions, before districts reach the lowest levels of performance.
- The business, philanthropic and other community leaders need to be included as key partners in helping chronically low-performing school districts identify, develop and implement improvement plans.
- There should be more mayoral involvement in the leadership of districts identified as chronically low-performing to help improve public accountability and better activate community engagement and support. This could also allow for a single point of authority and accountability.
- There should ultimately be a final consequence for chronically low-performing school districts that do not improve over time, such as state takeover. However, there should be additional options available for chronically low-performing school districts to forestall this consequence, such as partnering with third-party providers, adopting proven intervention strategies, collaborating with local, high-quality charter schools, and other turnaround strategies.
- Any new, supplemental funding for chronically low-performing school districts should be separate from the school funding formula and come with specific policy conditions identified by the state.

While we appreciate the effort of the Governor and State Superintendent to address this issue, we believe more deliberation is required.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ohio Excels is excited about many elements in the Governor's budget proposal. We believe that these investments will go a long way to supporting our students, educators and schools. As a representative of the business community, I can say that we look forward to collaborating with policymakers and educators to help improve the lives of our students. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.