



Testimony before the Ohio Senate Education Committee Supporting Senate Bill 241

March 14, 2018

Chairwoman Lehner, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Education Committee, Thank you for hearing me as a proponent of Senate Bill 241.

My name is Robert Brisk, and for the last eleven years I have served as the Head of The Wellington School. We serve 657 students starting with 3 year-olds all the way through 12th grade here in Columbus, Ohio. I have spent my entire 38 year career in independent schools in three states: first New Jersey, then Oregon and, now Ohio.

I've chosen to work in independent schools for one particular reason and that is independence. Independent schools are incubators for curricular and pedagogic innovations. Given room and freedom, we develop and implement bold initiatives which we then share with others schools, the public, and legislature. Right now, for instance, we at Wellington have developed a tool for measuring student engagement. We have defined engagement as the phenomenon when students both find their work deeply challenging and they love it. We believe measuring student engagement is a bold and important step forward. Beyond teaching content and skills, we can give our students no greater gift than to make them hungry for more. This tool measures the degree to which we have succeeded. Having developed this tool, we have shared it with public and charter schools as far east as New York City, and as far west as Wichita, Kansas. We serve by partnering with those who may not have the freedom we have.

I speak in favor of Senate Bill 241 because it assures schools like mine the freedom we need to develop independent of state regulatory interference. I also support this bill because it gives Ohio independent schools the freedom accorded to independent schools throughout the country. Both New Jersey and Oregon, and all other state governments have recognized what is true here in Ohio. Independent schools send virtually 100% of their students to college where the vast majority graduate in four years. Independent schools consistently score higher on standardized testing than any other sector. Independent schools innovate and share. And independent schools add a valuable niche to the educational ecosystem.

Let me give one example of what we do with our curricular independence. The science program at Wellington does not set goals around minutes of seat time in classes. Instead, we aim for students to become advanced and sophisticated researchers. Nearly a third of our seniors are working in labs around Ohio where they are contributing to true scholarship. For these students, well-intentioned regulations from the state serve to complicate their work and impose obstacles. It is our ambition to remove obstacles so they can pursue their ambitions.

The Regeneron Science Talent Search, formerly the Intel, and prior to that, The Westinghouse is often called the "Nobel Prize" for high school. Last night, Wellington Senior Grace Tian was in Washington D.C. along with 39 other student finalists from around the country to defend her prize



winning work before Nobel Prize winners and experts in the field. Grace is the only student from the state of Ohio to have attained this honor this year. In fact, there were only 2 semifinalists from Ohio. For comparison sake, New York led the field with 105. We believe that students doing math, science, English, history, language, and the arts can do work way beyond what the state requires if they are given the freedom to pursue it. Senate Bill 241 helps us to help students contribute mightily to the reputation of the state today and the economy of Ohio tomorrow.

And what if we fail? The independent schools of Ohio have two forms of rigorous accountability. First, as Mr. Dodd reports, we are governed by the strict standards of the Independent Schools Association of the Central States. They hold us to high standards although they do not prescribe specific content or pedagogy. Mr. Dodd has supplied you with information about their rigorous process.

The second form of accountability is far stricter. No child, no family, is required to enroll at Wellington. If we fail to live up to expectations, students and families leave us. Although we at Wellington offer almost 2 million dollars in financial aid annually, parents must sacrifice financially to enroll their children with us. If we fail to deliver, our families leave us and if we fail too often, we close. There can be no stricter accountability than the marketplace.

One other word about independence. I would like to state concerns about College Credit Plus. At Wellington, we are eager to enrich our students' experience with college courses. We have, however, two objections with the requirements of CCP. First, while we encourage students to take college courses while enrolled at Wellington when their work is beyond our capacity, or in an area we don't offer, we are concerned that students could circumvent our requirements with survey courses less challenging than our own, diminishing the value of a Wellington education.

Second, we are opposed to the state mandating that we include courses taken elsewhere as part of our grade point average. Our transcript is our word that we know the work represented and we vouch for its quality. College Credit Plus compromises our ability to present work as our work and compromises our students' and the school's credibility in college admissions.

Again, Bill 241 gives our schools the independence our schools need, our families want, and our students thrive under. Thank you for the opportunity to testify as a proponent of this bill. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert D. Brisk
Head of School
The Wellington School