Thank you, Chair Lehner, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Sykes, and Senate Education Committee members for the opportunity to provide written testimony on amendments potentially being offered on House Bill 477 related to softening the graduation requirements for future graduating classes.

In 2014, when the legislature adopted the current graduation requirements and raised the expectations for Ohio students to get a diploma, we applauded your resolve and commitment. It was a powerful acknowledgement that too few Ohio students were graduating high school with the skills necessary to be successful in college or to enter the workforce. Fully a third of Ohio students who did enter an Ohio college required remediation before taking credit-bearing courses. And we routinely heard reports of good paying jobs sitting vacant because young people didn’t have the skills that employers needed.

That’s why this body raised graduation requirements. Last year’s graduating class, the class of 2018, was supposed to be the first required to earn a diploma by demonstrating readiness in one of three ways: college readiness via the SAT or ACT, successful mastery of high school level academic competencies via objective end-of-course exams, or earning an industry credential and demonstrating work readiness skills.

Hoping to give students another year to adjust to the increased expectations, the legislature extended a set of alternative graduation requirements that were anything but rigorous. It was a huge missed opportunity but understandable if it was temporary. Unfortunately, the same issue is back again this year, and it’s clear that for many it was never meant to be a temporary fix.

Now we’re debating whether to further delay implementation to students who were just completing sixth or seventh grade when the original requirements were passed.

This is a problem. For years, we have been vocal in our criticism of the long-term consequences for lowering expectations for students and giving parents a false sense of security by misrepresenting their children’s readiness for post high school success. You can pass a law giving students a diploma, but being given a diploma isn’t the same thing as earning it. Without bolstering their academic skills, students are less likely to be ready for college. For those without an interest in going to college, putting in the work to acquire an industry certification could open the door to a job earning a living wage. If they can get a diploma without putting in the effort though, the chances are smaller that they graduate with in-demand skills.

I’m sure that none of this is new so far. Well, here’s something you’re unlikely to have heard before: there is absolutely no need for the legislature to take any action. Why?

1. There is an incredible lack of data and transparency around this issue. Despite repeatedly asking the legislature to change the law, there’s starting to be some indications that the situation isn’t as dire as some would lead you to believe. At the October state board meeting, the Ohio Department of Education released limited graduation rate data for the Class of 2018. It shows that 68 percent of students from the Class of 2018 graduated because they earned the required scores on state end-of-course (EOC) or ACT/SAT exams. While it’s yet to be released by ODE, if you add in historical data related to the number of students typically earning a diploma via the career-technical graduation pathway and the students who can receive a diploma under Ohio law based upon their Individualized Education Plan, you’re likely going to see somewhere between [77 and 80 percent](https://edexcellence.net/articles/%E2%80%9Cfixing%E2%80%9D-ohio%E2%80%99s-graduation-rate-should-be-the-least-of-our-concerns) of Ohio students receiving a diploma. This is lower than the 84 percent average graduation rate under the Ohio Graduation Test framework, but it’s a far cry from the disaster that many predicted. Moreover, this was the data for year one of significantly increased expectations. What would have happened in year 2? My money is on students and schools adjusting to the higher expectations and improved performance. That means more students graduating ready for college or prepared to directly enter the workforce.
2. If you’re still of the mind that this is a problem that needs to be resolved, there’s a better solution than extending the requirements that had been used for the class of 2018. This body gave the State Board of Education the authority to set the number of end-of-course exam points needed to earn a diploma. Eighteen points isn’t law. It’s a decision of the state board. If they truly believe that Ohio students need more time to adapt to the higher expectations, they could immediately pass a resolution to lower the points required to the number they see fit. This would give relief to students immediately while giving the legislature time to get more data from ODE and determine its long-term approach to the issue. Despite this power, the state board seems intent on abdicating its statutory responsibility and asking the legislature to be the one to lower expectations for Ohio students.

Don’t do it. When you raised the bar for graduation in 2014, you put the needs of students above your own comfort. I urge you maintain high expectations for all students. If you don’t, it’ll be the poorest, most disadvantaged students who suffer in the long run. They won’t get the additional supports they need to increase their likelihood of future success. Moreover, when the legislature weakens its expectations for graduation it communicates one of two things to students: either learning doesn’t matter, or we don’t believe you can reach these expectations. We owe it to our students, their families, and every citizen in Ohio to ensure that our graduates don’t earn participation trophies, but meaningful diplomas that indicate basic mastery of reading, writing, and math.