FAIRBORN DIGITAL ACADEMY

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Chairwoman Lehner, Vice Chair Brenner and Ranking Member Fedor and members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide comments today on the need to reform the funding formula for Dropout Prevention/Recovery E-schools (DOPR). My name is Erik Trtisch, and I am the Executive Director of Fairborn Digital Academy (FDA), a DOPR E-School. We are a district sponsored community school located in southwest Ohio in Greene County, where we serve students ages 14-22. Our students originate from 9 local school districts, and our enrollment ranges from 190-230 students.

Fairborn Digital Academy was founded with the help of our sponsor, Fairborn City Schools, because it was recognized there were some students who were not being successful in the traditional school model. The idea was to create a different school environment where students had more flexibility on when or where they did their schoolwork. Some students had health issues which caused them to not be able to sit in a classroom for long periods of time, so being able to take breaks from their work allowed these students to focus on their classes, and not on their health. Many of our students are very bright, but due to various reasons, they became disengaged with school. These students are often passed through the grades because teachers recognize their potential, but when they reach high school and they can't earn credits based on potential, they don't know how to re-engage with the curriculum and therefore begin failing classes. FDA's staff is able to nurture the love of learning back into these students because of our small student-teacher ratio. With a maximum of 30 students per teacher and an average closer to 20, the teacher has the time to individualize their approach to helping their students. Due to the impact of the current funding formula for e-schools, FDA may have to increase the student-teacher ratio, which most likely, will lessen the effectiveness of our approach.

When considering the goal of a school system, I think most people will agree that earning credits toward a diploma is important. FDA students completed 1,642 half credit courses this school year. We had an average full-time enrollment of 193 students. That means on average, each student completed 8.5 classes or 4.25 credits this year. A typical student is expected to earn 5 credits a year, so for a DOPR student to almost achieve that expectation is really exciting. But we are only going to receive funding as if we had 151 students, which means each funded student earned 5.5 credits. Imagine what we could do if we were funded for all of our students.

Because the funding for our school is based on participation hours we can prove a student was engaged with the curriculum, being able to support the social-emotional needs of students is unfunded. The students in a DOPR school, are often in need of this support due to the circumstances which led to them becoming at-risk of dropping out of high school. During the 2019-2020 school year, FDA was able to prove 78% student engagement in their classes. This is higher than the 73.1%

the Ohio Department of Education reported in their "Study of Internet- or Computer-Based Community School Funding Models"[1] report for DOPR schools during the 2018-2019 school year. Most likely, FDA would have had a higher percentage of student engagement, but due to the loss of testing in the spring of 2020, some of the hours we anticipated were not achieved. FDA has made it a priority to increase the participation of our students over the last four years since the participation funding model was created, and we will continue to do so if we can find the funding to stay open.

Many of the DOPR e-schools are facing challenging times when considering their budgets, and the uncertainty of what the 2020-2021 school year will look like only adds to this struggle. FDA was created for times like these. We have been doing remote learning since we opened our doors. But it takes funding to purchase all of the software and hardware necessary, and to have the support staff to make sure students are enrolled in all the different programs necessary for reporting to the state and getting to their classes. The office staff of FDA work hard to make sure the phones are being answered and parents are getting the answers to their questions about how students are going to be able to continue to receive a high-quality education when they can't be in a building. When you call our building, you don't get a long menu of options followed by a voicemail. On most every occasion, you will speak to a live person who can connect you with someone who can assist you if they can't do it themselves. We want our families to know we care about them and will take the time to help them. These services are not tied to participation directly, but without them, our participation will decrease.

Participation; course completion; and funding for getting a student started and supported are necessary to make sure we can help the most at-risk students in our education system. This is the idea behind the three-tiered funding proposal. According to last year's report card data, 7 of the 8 DOPR e-schools had a combined graduation rate higher than the state average of 30.8% for all DOPR schools. Please help to support the schools who are catching the students who are in danger of slipping through the fingers of our educational system and placing them on a path to become productive members of our communities.

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1 http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Finance-and-Funding/School-Payment-Reports/State-Funding-For-Schools/Community-School-Funding/Community-School-Funding-Information/Study-of-Internet-or-Computer-Based-Community-School-Funding-Models-1-1.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US