



**Senate Education Committee
SB 358 Proponent Testimony
Presented by Melissa Cropper,
President Ohio Federation of Teachers
September 2, 2020**

Chair Lehner and Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the Education Committee. I am Melissa Cropper, President of the Ohio Federation of Teachers. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on SB 358 which addresses accountability measures that need to be modified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

School districts across the state are currently in the process of re-opening. While some are starting completely remote, others are either using a hybrid model or are completely in-person with safety modifications in place. In every situation, we are working on balancing the education needs of students with the health and safety needs of students, staff, and our communities. We recognize that in spite of our best efforts, this year is not going to be a normal year and that the changing circumstances are going to have an impact on teaching and learning. That is why we support the provisions in this bill that recognize that we need to focus on meeting the needs of students in a less than ideal learning environment.

We support the following provisions in SB 358:

1. Seek federal waivers from high stakes testing and hold districts harmless from 2020-2021 report card benchmarks

The abrupt disruption in learning last spring, coupled with normal summer learning losses, has likely produced serious gaps in student learning. Time will need to be dedicated to getting students back on track before advancing to new content, making this a difficult year to meet “normal grade level” standards and benchmarks. Furthermore, given that there are still a lot of uncertainties about when the learning environment will return to normal, conditions are not optimal for either learning or testing.

In addition, we should use this time to re-evaluate our report card system. This pandemic has highlighted that there are severe inequities in our school districts and many of our schools are responsible for so much more than just delivering content. We need a report card that accurately reflects all of this.

2. Graduation flexibility

Students who are on track to graduate should not be held back due to disruptions caused by COVID-19. We support allowing districts to review progress toward graduation, supply any extra instruction that might be needed, and make decisions locally on whether a student is ready to graduate or not, based on their progress.

3. Third Grade Reading Guarantee Flexibility

Similar to graduation requirements, we do not want to see students held back in third grade due to disruptions caused by COVID-19, either because of disruptions to learning or disruptions to a system of fair assessments. We support allowing districts to make local determinations about whether a student is ready to advance or not.

4. Suspend evaluation of teachers for FY20-FY 21

Because of the challenges associated with teaching and learning this year, we support not including value-added data in teacher evaluations. We actually request that teacher evaluations be suspended for the year.

Our teachers have been thrown into teaching conditions that are new and unfamiliar to them. While they have been working to adjust their teaching for remote learning, it is unfair to assess their abilities under these circumstances. Furthermore, even under normal circumstances, it takes an incredible amount of planning and time for evaluators to conduct all the evaluations and will potentially take even more time this year as evaluators would have to be trained in how to evaluate teachers remotely. This time can be better used actually meeting the needs of students this year.

We do not support the following provision:

Providing Ed Choice vouchers to anyone who is not a current recipient

This bill allows for the continuation of performance vouchers to be deducted from the resident school districts funds. This is unsustainable. The Cleveland Heights-University Heights (CHUH) School District continues to be disproportionately harmed by voucher deductions. In FY 2020, CHUH lost \$7.2 million from their local funding, much of it for students who never intended to attend their public schools. Not only do voucher deductions drain much-needed resources from public school students, voucher students who attend private schools have worse education outcomes than comparable students in public schools, as documented in a recent Cincinnati Enquirer article.

While we understand not wanting to take away a voucher from someone who currently receives one, we do not support expanding vouchers to siblings or to students who were eligible previously but chose not to take one.

In addition, we recommend that the \$30 million dollars included in the Senate-passed version of HB9 be included in this bill. This will help districts that have been hurt in FY 2020, particularly majority-minority school districts, like Cleveland Heights, which have been disproportionately impacted by the Ed Choice vouchers.

This concludes my testimony and I welcome any questions.