

## Senate Education Committee

### Testimony on Senate Bill 358

**Lisa Gray, Ohio Excels**  
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Chair Lehner, Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Senate Bill 358 (SB 358). My name is Lisa Gray, and I am the President of Ohio Excels.

Ohio Excels is a 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.

COVID-19 has disrupted every part of society. However, educators and students across Ohio, especially low-income students in urban and rural areas, are facing an unprecedented challenge. We commend the educators who embraced the herculean task last school year to implement remote learning overnight, and we continue to be grateful for the educators dedicated to making the 2020-21 school year work for students.

During this current crisis, it is more important than ever to know how well our students are learning and to measure their progress. That is why Ohio Excels has serious concerns about the current version of SB 358.

We strongly support giving state assessments during the 2020-21 school year, especially during the spring. Now is a time when we need more data, not less. We all have heard stories about students and families that nobody has been able to reach, stories about students and families that do not have access to technology, and stories about parents struggling to balance work and their children's schooling. To be clear, it is next to impossible to perfectly deliver uniform, high-quality education during this pandemic. This is not about pointing fingers or assigning blame.

Instead, having statewide assessments will give policymakers and educators a consistent view of student performance. Assessments will provide data on the achievement gaps that will likely emerge. It will help direct the supports, resources, and interventions that are needed to catch students up. This data can also help us identify which delivery models – in-person instruction, hybrid, all online, and even specific online curricula – are stronger than others. This will allow educators to learn from each other and for all of us to learn what the best new practices are in this current educational environment.

Because of the role assessments play in monitoring and improving equity, support for assessments is a bipartisan issue. When the U.S. Department of Education notified states that federal assessments will not be waived, the move was supported by a broad coalition of advocacy groups, including the Center for American Progress, the National Urban League, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Education Trust and the Foundation for Excellence in Education (ExcellinEd).

It's difficult to predict how the pandemic will change week to week. Predicting what will be happening this spring is simply not possible. Fortunately, we do not have to make a decision on spring assessments right now. The state is currently working on ways to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. For example, the state is developing a way to administer the spring assessments online in case the pandemic worsens. If there are major disruptions during the school year, the state can cancel assessments again like it did last school year. However, it is imperative that we work hard to avoid these disruptions. It would be unacceptable to go two years without any insight into how our students are learning.

While we think the spring assessments are critical, there are two areas where we encourage flexibility: fall assessments and accountability. Some districts are having difficulty meeting the timelines for fall assessments. For example, the November 1 statutory deadline for the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) is a challenge. It has also been difficult for all-virtual districts and schools to find space and time for administering the third grade reading assessment. In these two cases, and only for the districts and schools that really need it, we encourage the General Assembly to create flexibility immediately.

With regard to accountability, we believe it is important to assess our students and publicly share the results. However, we do not believe that the report card should include ratings or that districts and schools should face sanctions because of the report card for the 2020-21 school year. This will lower the stakes for assessments this year and help educators focus on improvement. We encourage the General Assembly to make these changes to accountability before the end of 2020. However, this is not the time to suspend the report card for the 2021-22 school year. Ohio Excels is opposed to this provision in SB 358.

We believe that SB 358 seeks to make too many premature decisions and changes that will not further educational equity in Ohio. For example, we do not agree with delaying the third grade reading guarantee at a time when literacy is more important than ever. As a substitute to the current bill, we recommend the following policy changes (a few of which I've already mentioned):

- Provide flexibility for fall assessments, such as the KRA and third grade reading, to districts and schools who need it right away.
- Maintain spring state assessments.
- Create and release report cards for the 2020-21 school year, but do not assign ratings.
- Pause state accountability and sanctions for the 2020-21 school year.
- Continue educator evaluations, but waive the portions based on assessments.
- Extend flexibilities for educator licensure and substitute teachers.
- Extend other logistical provisions such as allowing publicly accessible online school board meetings and giving the Ohio Department of Education flexibility in determining certain deadlines.

Thank you for the opportunity to share Ohio Excels' recommendations for SB 358. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.