

Senate Education Committee

Testimony on Senate Bill 358

**Lisa Gray, Ohio Excels
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Joseph D. Roman
Greater Cleveland Partnership

Theodore Adams
L Brands

Beverly Beery
Beery Insurance Services, LLC

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Columbus Partnership

Gary Z. Lindgren
Cincinnati Business Committee

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Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland

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Lovett & Ruth Peters Foundation

Patrick J. Tiberi
Ohio Business Roundtable

Lisa A. Gray
President, Ohio Excels

Chair Lehner, Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Substitute 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 postsecondary 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.

SB 358 is an opportunity to address the most critical and time-sensitive issues created by COVID-19. The bill currently includes some positive and needed changes, but it also includes several issues that raise some serious concerns.

Ohio Excels supports the flexibility provided in SB 358 as it relates to students unable to take the fall assessments, the COVID-19 related deadlines, health screening requirements, public hearings and excluding Value-Added data in educator evaluations for the 2020-21 school year. We also support a pause in rating the measures on the report card and the state consequences tied to the report card for the 2020-21 school year. This will lower the stakes for assessments this year and help educators focus on improvement. However, the state should continue to transparently report as much of the report card's data as possible.

Parents value the state's report card, and they believe it is still important to report student performance even during COVID-19. Ohio Excels recently conducted a poll of parents on issues related to the impact of COVID-19, state assessments, report cards, and supports. About nine out of 10 parents believe the report cards are important. This was true in January of this year and it remains true this fall. When asked about this year specifically, 84 percent of parents still believe there should be public reporting on how well students are learning.

Because of this, we are concerned that SB 358 also excludes ratings from the state's report card for the 2021-22 school year as well. **Ohio Excels strongly opposes extending the pause to the 2021-22 school year, or any other provision affecting the next school year, at this time.** It is difficult to predict how the pandemic will change from week to week. Predicting what will be happening and what will be needed for this coming school year is simply not possible. Fortunately, we do not have to decide this fall. The Governor and General Assembly can address these issues next year when it has a better picture of how the pandemic will affect students and schools.

SB 358 requires the Ohio Department of Education to apply for a waiver to cancel testing for this school year. **Ohio Excels strongly supports giving state assessments during the 2020-21 school year and opposes this waiver requirement.** Now is a time when we need more data, not less. About eight out of 10 parents want a statewide assessment for their children for the 2020-21 school year. Half of parents said they definitely want a statewide assessment. To be clear, it is extremely difficult 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. Our poll shows that 73 percent of parents believe some additional supports will be needed because of the disruptions caused by COVID-19. It would be unacceptable to go two years without any consistent measures into how our students are learning.

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). **Any assessment waiver request by the Ohio Department of Education – while we believe it would be a mistake to pursue – should only be done with the consent of critical external stakeholders: parents, civil rights advocates, the business community and others.**

SB 358 extends a provision originally intended to help seniors in the Class of 2020 last spring who were unable to meet graduation requirements because of the disruptions by COVID-19. At the time, state assessments were canceled, and schools were not prepared to switch to remote learning. However, as of now, neither of those two scenarios are true for this school year. **It is inappropriate and unnecessary to suspend graduation requirements for the Class of 2021 at this time.** SB 358 already includes another provision to help students in the event they cannot take an assessment because of COVID-19, allowing students to use their course grade if there are disruptions this spring.

SB 358 also removes the retention component of the third-grade reading guarantee. We believe that there should be a requirement that parents be informed of their child's reading ability, the challenges and supports for the child should they be promoted to the fourth grade, and agreement from parents that the child be promoted.

Finally, recent drafts of SB 358 include provisions for EdChoice. **Ohio Excels believes that EdChoice needs a comprehensive solution and that this bill should focus only on addressing the immediate impacts of COVID-19.** We recommend that the EdChoice provisions of the bill be removed and quickly addressed in other legislation.

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