

## Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee

### Testimony on Substitute House Bill 13

**Lisa Gray, Ohio Excels  
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President, Ohio Excels

Chairmen Wilson, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Williams, and members of the Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on Substitute House Bill 13 (HB 13). 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.

All of our lives have been disrupted in some way due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Every portion of our population has been adapting to new ways to complete our daily tasks so that we can keep our friends and family safe. This also includes our K-12 and postsecondary students throughout the state. Following the stay-at-home order, a mass experiment of remote learning was undertaken to ensure our students were engaged and on track for success with minimal educational disruptions. This experience has highlighted and exacerbated the digital gap in our state, which has left far too many students at a disadvantage from the rest of their peers. Equitable access to broadband is a critical infrastructure investment that will help to ensure no student is left behind.

Current implementations of remote learning rely on platforms that require speeds necessary for video conferencing, lesson streaming, assignment downloads, and more. Often, households have more than one person utilizing the connection at the same time. This potentially includes multiple students or one or both parents working from home. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) recommends speeds at a minimum of what HB 13 describes as *tier 1* – or 10 megabits per second – for two users. Four users require at least 25 megabits per second according to the FCC, which aligns with this bill's *tier 2* qualification.

While many short-term solutions, such as hotspots, have been deployed, this does not solve the bigger issue at hand, which is the urgency for consistent, dependable, quality access to broadband that can serve the needs of our students and their families everyday – whether we are in a crisis or not. In order to be effective, broadband access must have reliable connectivity to ensure a consistent and uninterrupted education experience. Minimum speeds outlined in HB 13 and low latency are required for the capability of remote learning methods utilized today.

The current state of broadband has limitations, including:

- Coverage: Some last-mile regions lack access to any broadband delivery method. The complete lack of access in these unserved areas, most of which are in the southeast region of the state, leads to students that are completely disconnected from any educational experience.
- Speed: Rural regions that do have access often have low-performing, outdated broadband delivery methods. This results in speeds that are incapable of meeting students' needs.
- Latency: Outdated delivery methods result in extremely high latency of over 2,000 milliseconds. This delay makes it impossible for students to have an efficient lesson streaming experience. Students with this method of remote learning are at a disadvantage compared to students that can receive a more interactive and engaging educational experience.
- Cost: The existing delivery options are subject to much higher costs in comparison to other broadband delivery methods that this bill could facilitate. Many lower income populations are therefore left with no options for broadband access.

The lack of quality broadband in some regions of Ohio, especially in rural areas, is often due to a low return on investment on infrastructure for broadband providers. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, it can cost providers over \$10,000 to run a mile of cable, but better delivery methods would address the limitations of the current state of broadband. The difference between the cost of an expansion project and what the provider deems effective as an investment, or the broadband funding gap. By providing broadband providers with program grants from the Broadband Expansion Program Authority as outlined in HB 13, the broadband funding gap will be filled and providers will be enabled to expand high-quality infrastructure.

The benefits of expanding broadband coverage through HB 13 include:

- Education: Students will be able to utilize effective methods of remote learning. With access to the broadband tiers outlined in HB 13, students can utilize lesson streaming, synchronous video classes, interactive engaging content, and more.
- Economic: Access to reliable broadband would facilitate economic development in rural regions. Previously unserved or underserved individuals would gain access to online employment options, training, and other resources. Rural businesses can utilize broadband access to promote themselves to a wider audience, network, and empower themselves with access to online resources.
- Health Care: The health of Ohioans, particularly in rural areas, will be promoted with access to broadband. It would allow for access to telemedicine services that may not be available locally.
- Social: Ohioans in unserved or underserved regions are often cutoff from friends and family members that do not live nearby. By having access to reliable quality broadband, they can connect with loved ones using video calling software.

Ohio Excels believes that HB 13 is an effective start to the broadband issues highlighted following the COVID-19 pandemic. By providing broadband providers with program grants and enabling them to expand broadband access to underserved regions, it will promote the success of students and families throughout the state. To ensure the needs of students are represented in broadband expansion, we recommend that the Broadband Expansion Program Authority created by HB 13 include a member with an education background. Whether students must utilize remote learning for the remainder of this school year, or in the future, it is important we invest in the infrastructure that can make this possible.

Finally, Ohio Excels leads Complete to Compete Ohio, a coalition of prominent state and local business, education, and public policy organizations. The coalition's goal is to increase the number of Ohioans earning high-value credentials and postsecondary degrees. Broadband accessibility is part of the coalition's new strategic plan, [Bridging Ohio's Workforce Gap](#), and members of the coalition developed and signed the attached letter in support of HB 13.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, I can be reached at [LisaGray@OhioExcels.org](mailto:LisaGray@OhioExcels.org).



To Members of the Ohio Senate:

As leaders of state's business, education and public policy organizations who form the Complete to Compete Ohio coalition, we are writing to focus your attention on Sub. House Bill 13 (HB 13), crucial legislation to expand broadband internet coverage across our state and ensure that all Ohioans have access to learning opportunities resulting in a high-value credential or postsecondary degree. This legislation passed with strong, bipartisan support in the Ohio House in June and is now awaiting Senate approval. We urge your support to prioritize HB 13 for passage in the Senate's current session.

Today, hundreds of thousands of Ohio households lack access to the dependable, high-speed broadband service they need in order to learn and thrive in an increasingly connected world. Many Ohioans live in areas of the state with no internet access at all, primarily due to a lack of investment in the necessary infrastructure.

This has created a destructive and inequitable digital divide in Ohio, where too many of our citizens are denied access to one of modern life's most essential tools. Not only are millions of lives held back from achieving their full potential, Ohio's competitive position with other states suffers and employers are also left searching for a skilled, well-trained workforce. While the digital divide is nothing new in this state and has been a longstanding concern for Complete to Compete Ohio, the coronavirus pandemic has brought the problem into sharp focus as so many in Ohio have been forced to study or work online.

By creating the Residential Broadband Expansion Program, HB 13 will provide grants for local communities to expand high-speed internet infrastructure in unserved and underserved areas of the state. As passed by the Ohio House, the legislation funds these grants with \$20 million for the remainder of this budget biennium and removes regulatory barriers in order to facilitate broadband expansion.

While the primary benefits of expanded broadband coverage will be felt in education, job training and workforce development, HB 13 will also have positive impacts for currently underserved areas in other important ways, including healthcare, economic development and small-business opportunities, not to mention the personal wellbeing of so many Ohioans.



We are convinced that HB 13 is an important step to eliminating Ohio's digital divide, a problem which left unaddressed will keep too many in our state disadvantaged and less able to succeed. We believe this is a critical infrastructure investment that will pay dividends now and in the future. Please join us and the diverse cross section of Ohio's business and education community we represent in our enthusiastic support for swift Senate passage of HB 13.

Sincerely,

College Now Greater Cleveland

Higher Education Compact of Greater Cleveland

Learn to Earn Dayton

Mahoning Valley College Access Program

Ohio Association for Career and Technical Education

Ohio Association of Career Technical Superintendents

Ohio Business Roundtable

Ohio Excels

Ohio Mayors Alliance

Ohio Workforce Association

VANTAGE Aging