



Thank you, Chair Terhar, Vice Chair Lehner, Ranking Member Fedor and the members of the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education for the opportunity today to provide testimony on graduation requirements, academic distress commissions, school report cards, and other provisions in HB 166.

My name is Chad Aldis, and I am the Vice President for Ohio Policy and Advocacy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The Fordham Institute is an education-focused nonprofit that conducts research, analysis, and policy advocacy with offices in Columbus, Dayton, and Washington, D.C. Our Dayton office is also an Ohio charter school sponsor.

Fordham believes that every student should be well-prepared to achieve success as adults. To that end, we support efforts that ensure all students have opportunities to attend high-quality schools and exit high school with the knowledge and skills necessary for college, career, or military service.

Evidence from top-performing states show that rigorous accountability policies—and committing to them—can lead to strong improvements in student achievement, especially among less advantaged children. Ohio, too, has adopted similar education policies: In fact, the ones I'll be discussing today were enacted with the aim of driving higher achievement through robust accountability. But in the face of fierce debate, the state has struggled at times to maintain these reforms. In order for Ohio students to fully reap their benefits, legislators need to make some necessary policy refinements, while also recommitting to the goal of preparing more young people for life after high school.

### **Graduation requirements**

In Ohio, we've long recognized that a high-school diploma shouldn't be a participation trophy but rather a credential awarded after young people demonstrate readiness to take their next step in life. For decades, Ohio has required students to meet course requirements and pass state exams to graduate. But upon concerns about the Ohio Graduation Tests' lack of rigor, the state moved to new standards that now ask young people to meet more stringent benchmarks on state exams, earn a college-ready ACT or SAT score, or earn industry recognized credentials.

These requirements have been strongly contested and alternative routes have been offered to the classes of 2018 to 2020. As many of you know, we at Fordham have vigorously opposed lower-level options. Young people who graduate based on weak alternatives are harmed when they exit high school lacking the skills needed for lifelong success. Throughout this debate, however, we've recognized the potential need to tweak the original plan in light of present realities. And we've said that students struggling to meet readiness standards deserve the time and supports needed to reach that goal.

With the long-term graduation requirements for the classes of 2021 and beyond still in question, we at Fordham support the proposal of Ohio Excels, a nonprofit coalition of Ohio business leaders, and the Alliance for High Quality Education (AHQE), a group representing about seventy school districts.

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Briefly, the proposal works like this. Students must demonstrate competency on the state's Algebra I and English II end-of-course exams. If, after receiving remedial supports and retaking these exams, they haven't met the competency targets, students may earn diplomas based on satisfying military enlistment requirements or meeting career-and-technical requirements that include either earning industry credentials, completing an apprenticeship, or passing state exams linked to technical courses. Continuing current practice, all students must meet the state's course requirements but the proposal also adds requirements that students earn seals based on non-academic skills.

Taken together, the Ohio Excels and Alliance's proposal is a strong one. It assures us that students graduate with a strong academic foundation in English and math, are ready to join the military, or have the technical skills and experiences they need to embark on rewarding careers. We therefore recommend that the Ohio Excels and Alliance's proposal be adopted as the state's permanent graduation requirements.

### **Academic distress commissions**

First enacted in state law in 2005 and updated in 2015, academic distress commissions (ADC) were created to ensure that low-performing districts improve for the sake of their students. Under the House Bill 70 revisions, the ADC model was significantly altered as the legislation empowered an ADC-appointed CEO who is charged with creating a district turnaround plan and has authority in various matters of school management. However, as implementation has rolled out, the ADC model has been sharply criticized, especially by the local school boards.

Some have argued that the best way to resolve the political frictions is to abolish the ADC model. In essence, this is the approach of the recently passed House Bill 154. But doing this would be unwise. The state still has an obligation to taxpayers and families to step in when students aren't being served well, and the districts currently under ADC oversight have a history of low academic achievement and weak student growth. Jettisoning the ADC model rather than improving it would be politically popular, but it would come at the expense of students.

To improve the ADC model, we recommend the more careful approach of Senate Bill 110. This legislation strategically addresses some of the underlying issues of the current model without giving poor performing districts a free pass. Under this bill, struggling districts would still face pressure to improve, but the state intervention would include more local input and be more transparent.

Improving low performing schools is hard work. But as experiences from other states tell us, it's not impossible to transform education in districts that have struggled. If Ohio wants to implement successful turnaround efforts, we need to strike a balance between local control, strong accountability, and transparency, rather than just throwing in the towel. We believe that Senate Bill 110 is a positive step in the right direction.

## School report cards

Ohio families and taxpayers deserve an opportunity to review the progress of their local schools. Strong, transparent report cards are key to meeting this goal and to spurring higher school performance. For two decades, Ohio's school report cards have served as the critical tool for assuring transparency and accountability for outcomes. The report cards have evolved over the years, with the present iteration being implemented starting in fall 2013. Today's report card is packed with information about student achievement, growth, and readiness for college and career. This multi-faceted approach offers a wealth of data, but as new measures have been added, the report card itself has become increasingly complex. Concerns have also been raised about the fairness of report cards, especially to high-poverty schools.

In a report released in December 2017,<sup>1</sup> we outlined several careful changes that would result in a fairer, more streamlined report card. The appendix to my testimony contains a sketch of what the report card might look like under our plan. And in contrast to proposals that would simply toss the current system and replace it with "data dashboards" that display a blizzard of statistical information without proper context, our approach maintains the core strengths of the current system which include intuitive letter grades and a clear, user-friendly overall rating. The key changes we recommend include:

- Reduce the number of A–F school ratings from fifteen to just six. The remaining components would include the following: 1) Achievement—based on the performance index score; 2) Progress—based on the overall value added score; 3) Graduation—based on the four-year rate; 4) Equity—based on the performance index and value added scores of subgroups; and 5) Prepared for Success—based on its current structure, which includes measures such as ACT/SAT and AP scores. Finally, we recommend maintaining an Overall rating that combines the various dimensions of the report card to create a clear summary of overall school quality.
- Restructure the Gap Closing component and rename it "Equity." Because it tracks subgroup performance (for instance, low-income students), the current Gap Closing component serves an important purpose. But it's also notoriously complicated. We suggest simplifying the component to clearly show whether each subgroup meets state achievement and growth targets. We suggest the renaming to reflect that this measure tracks whether all students make satisfactory progress, including subgroups that typically achieve at higher levels, such as gifted children.
- Create a better balance between achievement and growth measures in the overall rating. Achievement and growth measures provide different, complementary views of school quality—and both should contribute to the overall rating. If the recommendations above are adopted, a straightforward equal weighting approach across the remaining components would ensure equal weight in elementary schools. In high school, slightly heavier weight would be placed on achievement- and readiness-based components as students get closer to the finish line. By placing greater emphasis on growth measures, which aren't linked to demographics, high-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://fordhaminstitute.org/ohio/research/back-basics-plan-simplify-and-balance-ohios-school-report-cards>

poverty schools would be treated more evenhandedly. A high-poverty school successfully helping students who enter behind would never be deemed a failure under this system.

We agree that there is room to improve school report cards. But the revisions need to be undertaken carefully, with transparency to Ohio families and taxpayers first in mind. We believe our recommendations would move Ohio toward a simpler, clearer, and fairer report card.

### **Other provisions in HB 166**

There are a variety of education policies included in HB 166 that deserve mention.

#### ***Support for Low-Income Students***

We support Governor DeWine's proposal to award funding for wellness services based on the percentage of economically disadvantaged children residing in a district. It is critical for the state to provide funding to ensure the needs of our most disadvantaged students are met. On a related note, we also support the funding allocated to reduce the costs for low-income students to take Advanced Placement exams. This reduces a barrier for our high-achieving but disadvantaged students.

#### ***Teacher Licensure***

We support language giving school districts and charter schools increased leeway in using teachers on long-term substitute licenses when necessary. In areas where there are teacher shortages, this is critical. It is also an important mechanism for attracting talented mid-career professionals into the teaching field.

#### ***Industry Certificates***

Several states have had tremendous success providing incentive funding to encourage schools to help students acquire in-demand industry certificates. This is an important initiative deserving of support.

#### ***EdChoice Income-Based Expansion***

Low-income students continue to have the fewest options when it comes to finding the right school. We support the continued expansion of this private school choice opportunity.

#### ***State Report Cards***

HB 166 would make the overall grade of a school (applies to districts, too) the higher of the performance index or the value added measure. While well-intentioned, this would result in a dramatic increase in grades around the state. Such an increase would make schools appear to be better performing than they actually are and would result in a significant softening of accountability. Ohio families and taxpayers deserve a view of overall school quality that considers both student achievement and growth over time, not one or the other.

The legislation also moves from a three year average for calculating value added to a one year measure. We are mostly neutral on this and see merit in the arguments on both sides. This change, however, is likely going to increase the volatility of the measure, with schools and districts swinging back and forth from A to F. This will diminish the credibility of value-added and could be used by critics as a basis for questioning the entire framework. A better approach might be to move to a weighted three-year average with the most current year being valued at 50 percent of the overall value added grade.

The bill also includes language that requires every school (and district) to receive either an A or B if report card grades aren't issued by ODE by the statutory deadline of September 15. This measure would hurt parents looking for information on school quality. A separate but similar provision would require a complete restart of all "sanctions"—including restructuring, academic distress commissions, and community school closure—whenever a change (even an administrative one) is made to the state report card system. Passing this language will codify an either/or provision that would hurt everyone. The state would be in the unenviable position of either leaving the school report card untouched every year—even if improvements are needed—or gutting many of the state's efforts to address poor academic performance.

### ***Academic Distress Commissions (ADC)***

Looking to improve on how ADCs function and the role of local communities is important, and the House should be commended for attempting to address those problems. However, HB 154 was rushed and is very much an unfinished product. Here are a few of its significant weaknesses:

- There is no clear exit criteria for schools that improve while operating under an improvement plan. By failing to include exit criteria, the state exposes schools to potentially biased and ineffective measures of their improvement.
- The bill provides no additional interventions for schools that fail to improve after four years of local intervention. If local districts can't improve on their own within four years, then the state needs to step up and intervene on behalf of students and their families.
- The bill does not require schools to use student achievement and growth as benchmarks in their improvement plans.
- The bill does not include a mechanism for making sure that school improvement plans are actually evidence-based. School improvement plans should undergo an objective review by an outside entity in order to ensure a rigorous evidence base.

### ***Charter Schools***

Since House Bill 2 reformed Ohio's charter school laws, the General Assembly has trod very carefully on the issue and hasn't made many changes. This pause in legislative action has helped to identify some areas where changes are merited. HB 166 tackles some of those issues. While we are supportive of some of the changes, others could materially weaken charter school accountability just as the sector is showing signs of improvement.

Key charter provisions in the bill include:

- Charter school sponsors receiving an effective rating for three consecutive years will need to go through the evaluation process only once every five years instead of annually. The sponsor evaluation process is incredibly laborious, and it makes sense not to require it every year. However, five years could be too long between evaluations. In addition, consideration should be given to requiring the calculation of the academic component every year and giving the sponsor a new rating if it receives an F on the academic performance measure.
- Dropout recovery school report cards would be put on hold until ODE does a report and the General Assembly acts on the department's recommendations. If the legislature doesn't act, this essentially ends report cards for dropout recovery schools. That would be a bad but predictable result of the current wording in HB 166.
- Charter sponsors under the bill would only have to provide opening assurances in a school's first year or when it changed locations. Currently, operating assurances provide an important annual accountability check on things like teacher licensure and background checks, special education plans, minimum enrollment and other non-building related issues.
- The sub-bill included language (before it was deleted in the omnibus) that required e-schools to create an individual learning plan for each student, develop a process for notifying parents when students aren't participating, and eventually disenroll students that are not engaged. Given Ohio's recent experiences, we think these are smart, sensible changes and would urge the Senate to include these changes.
- When Ohio's charter school automatic closure law was created it typically identified a handful of the very lowest performing schools each year. Without modifications, it could close many more in future years. We support the move to require three consecutive years of low performance instead of two out of three years.
- Similar to some of the report card changes, if ODE doesn't assign sponsor ratings by November 15 then every sponsor would receive a rating of effective or higher. We think this is bad policy and should be removed.
- Periodically, charter schools merge operations and become one. While we aren't opposed to this practice, it shouldn't be undertaken solely as a move to avoid charter school accountability provisions. The budget language appears designed to try to prevent that. To the extent it's as narrowly drafted as possible, we support that effort.
- Maintains the governor's proposal to provide additional resources to the state's best charter schools. This is vital given the well-documented, financial inequities faced by charter schools in Ohio. Although we continue to believe that all charters should receive increased funding, this is a big step forward. Importantly, driving additional dollars to top performers not only rewards and strengthens Ohio's top-performing charters but also creates an incentive for other schools to improve. Charter school growth in Ohio has slowed over recent years, leaving thousands of needy children without quality school options. This proposal would offer funding to promising startup schools, which could in turn lessen the demand for high quality school options.

In recent years, Ohio has undertaken major reforms aimed at improving the readiness of students for college and careers. Among them include interventions in low-performing districts, stronger graduation

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requirements, and transparent report cards that focus attention on outcomes. With some course corrections, Ohio will continue to build momentum towards its goal of having all young people graduate fully ready to tackle the challenges of tomorrow.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. I'm happy to answer any questions that you may have.

# 2017-2018 Report Card for Buckeye Grove School District

101 Main Street  
Washington, OH 55555  
Grade Span: K-12  
Enrollment: 1,025



**OVERALL  
GRADE**  
**B**



## ACHIEVEMENT

The Achievement component represents how well students perform on state exams and awards schools additional credit when students reach higher achievement levels.

**COMPONENT  
GRADE**  
**C**



## EQUITY

The Equity component shows how well schools are meeting the performance expectations for various subgroups of students and is based on subgroups' performance index and value-added scores.

**COMPONENT  
GRADE**  
**B**



## PROGRESS

The Progress component examines students' growth over time based on their past performance.

**COMPONENT  
GRADE**  
**B**



## GRADUATION

The Graduation Rate component measures the percent of students who are successfully earning a high school diploma.

**COMPONENT  
GRADE**  
**A**



## PREPARED FOR SUCCESS

The Prepared for Success component demonstrates how prepared Ohio's students are to enter college or the workforce after high school graduation.

**COMPONENT  
GRADE**  
**B**