

Invited Testimony of Tom Torkelson
Founder & CEO, IDEA Public Schools

Senate Finance Subcommittee on
Primary and Secondary Education
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SUMMARY

- Ohio's proposed Quality Community Schools Support legislation reflects the belief that any child, regardless of race or zip code, can achieve success in school with the right resources and opportunities.
 - IDEA selects new regions for growth based on the need for quality public schools and the right conditions for new IDEA schools, students, and teachers to succeed. Quality Community Schools Support legislation is progress toward Ohio putting the resources in place needed to attract quality school operators, such as IDEA.
 - IDEA Public Schools has a strong track record of student achievement and success in growing new regions. This includes a 98.4% four-year graduation rate, 98% Advanced Placement course participation rate, and 100% college acceptance rate among graduating seniors for the past 13 years in a row, while serving a student population that is 88% economically disadvantaged.
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Good afternoon, Chair Terhar, Vice Chair Lehner, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, and thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Tom Torkelson, and I lead IDEA Public Schools, a non-profit public charter school network serving 44,000 in pre-k through 12th grade in 79 schools across Texas and Louisiana. I am a Toledo native proud to return to my home state to share with you the strategies IDEA Public Schools uses to create strong outcomes for students and the role I believe we could play here in Ohio.

I am testifying today to support HB166, and in particular the Quality Community Schools Support provisions. In other states, including Texas, Louisiana, and Florida, targeted state policy has supported the expansion of high-performing public charter schools in order to benefit low-income, historically underserved students. I am excited to see Ohio on a path to making similar investments.

SERVING THE HIGHEST-NEED STUDENTS

IDEA's mission is to prepare students from historically underserved communities for success in college and citizenship. 88% of our students are low-income and 36% are English Language Learners. Like all public schools, IDEA receives state funding, is tuition-free, and is held to the same accountability measures and transparency standards as traditional public schools. As a public charter school, IDEA can be more innovative, rather than using a one-size-fits-all school model.

My co-founder JoAnn Gama and I began our careers as fourth-grade teachers in Donna, Texas. We saw that too often, low-income students, English language learners, students of color, and young people with special needs did not have access to a quality education or challenging coursework. So we started

an after-school program that became a small public charter school. Over time, at the request of parents, we expanded to new communities. Today we are the fastest-growing charter school network in the country. We are proud to have earned consistent recognition in *US News and World Report's* "Best High Schools in America" and to be the recipient of the prestigious Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools.

Unfortunately, the same inequality we saw in 2000 still exists today in Texas and around the country, including Ohio. The inequality that still exists is one reason parents and community leaders across Texas have invited IDEA into their communities. When we open a new school, we make a promise to our students and parents: if you stick with us, we will stick with you to college and through college. For the past 13 years, fully 100% of our graduating seniors have been accepted to college. 99.85% of these students have matriculated to their post-secondary program. While the national college graduation rate for the lowest income students is only 11%, according to the Pell Institute, 50% of IDEA's most recent cohort of alumni graduated from college. While we're excited that our students are exceeding expectations, we won't be satisfied until our students are graduating at the same rates as their high income peers. We know that low-income students, when properly supported and prepared for the rigors of college, can achieve at the highest levels.

We achieve this through focusing on early literacy and instilling a love of reading in all of our students in Pre-K-3rd grade; providing access to rigorous, Advanced Placement coursework for every high school student; and aligning our organizational resources to best serve students, the vast majority of whom come from underserved communities. We combine the access of a free, open-enrollment K-12 school with the rigor of the best college preparatory schools, ensuring that each and every IDEA student takes at least 11 AP courses while enrolled.

SERVING OHIO STUDENTS

Our desire to serve historically underserved students drives us to seek out the highest-need communities for our expansion. The need in Ohio is pressing:

- There are few better predictors of college completion than success on an AP exam. Yet only 13 percent of Ohio students graduate having earned a passing score on an AP exam. 6 percent of urban students pass at least one exam. Compare this to IDEA, where over 90 percent of students pass at least one AP exam.
- Just 33 percent of Ohio students attain at least an Associate's degree within six years of leaving high school. In urban communities, this number drops to 17 percent. IDEA's six-year college graduation rate, with a population that is 88 percent low income, was 50 percent for our most recent cohort.

IDEA has grown across Texas, and into Louisiana, to address similar inequities. We have done so successfully, earning a reputation for quality. This fall, seven years after we launched in Austin and San Antonio, Texas, we're sending 100% of our graduating classes in both cities off to college. Our schools in both of these regions have significantly outperformed the average for low-income students. Schools that we launched in El Paso, Texas and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, this year are also off to a strong start. Our academic outcomes, and the life outcomes of our alumni, continue to improve even as we grow.

IDEA is working with community leaders across the state to find a path to serve Ohio students. Ohio already has many of the conditions needed for high-quality non-profit schools to grow: committed community leaders; passionate, talented educators; and parents eager for new school options. However, there is still room for improvement in order to attract the highest-performing schools to Ohio.

The largest barrier to bringing high performing charter operators to Ohio is per-pupil funding. Although funding does not always correlate with higher student achievement, we have found that a certain level of base funding is necessary to provide a quality education to students in high-poverty areas. This is why we support Governor DeWine's proposal to invest \$30M per year in schools that have met high standards in Ohio and other states. Efforts like this one to increase the amount of funding available to the high-performing, public schools that serve underserved populations is crucial to the ability of IDEA and our peers to continue our success on behalf of students.

Currently, IDEA receives roughly \$9800 per pupil in Texas. Serving a similar student body, we predict that we would receive closer to \$8500 per pupil in Ohio. This 13% decrease between Texas and Ohio would make it very challenging to grow in the Buckeye State. We recognize that increasing funding across the board would not guarantee improved student achievement in Ohio. Programs like the Quality Community Schools Support are necessary to ensure that public dollars reach the schools with a track record of success.

Efforts like this yield results. Two years ago, IDEA did not consider Florida to be a state where we could successfully operate. Among other challenges, the per pupil was too low, and the path to approval for new charter schools was long and difficult. However, thanks to bold local leaders, Florida created a new program called Schools of Hope. The Schools of Hope legislation allows high-performing public charter schools like IDEA and KIPP to access start-up funds covering over 80% of launch costs. Today, we are on track to serve students in Florida, starting in 2021.

My hope is that, following this legislative session and subsequent ones, we can tell a similar story about Ohio. Children in this state deserve exceptional schools. IDEA is confident that, with moderate improvements to law like those HB166 contains, IDEA can grow to serve children in Ohio.

We respectfully ask you to support HB166 so that we may find a way to work with the communities that want and need IDEA and better options for their children. We are optimistic that HB166 will result in better outcomes for students across the state for years to come, and we thank this Committee for your focus on such a crucial issue.