

HB 110
Ohio House Finance Committee
March 11, 2021

Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Crawley and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for considering this testimony on behalf of the members of the Greater Recovery And Dropout-Prevention Schools (GRADS) Coalition, which consists of ten Dropout Prevention and Recovery (DOPR) schools operating throughout the state. DOPR Schools educate some of Ohio's most vulnerable students who have fallen behind in the traditional school environment. These schools provide unique learning environments and services to help these students get back on track, and most importantly earn a diploma. On behalf of the schools in the GRADS Coalition, we would urge this Committee to consider two changes to HB 110. First, we would ask that high-performing DOPR schools qualify for funding under the Quality Community School Support Program. Additionally, we would encourage this committee to extend the pilot program for DOPR E-Schools that was created in HB 123 from last session.

The Quality Community School Support Program was created in the previous budget process as a way to provide high-quality community schools with the additional financial support necessary to expand their services to students. This program has made a profound impact on community schools. The financial support made available through this program has allowed community schools to invest in services that directly improve the quality of education their students receive. Unfortunately, DOPR schools are prohibited from qualifying for the program because of their unique report card, which prevents them from being classified as a "community school of quality." We would ask that DOPR schools achieving the highest ranks on their report cards be eligible for this program, which will help provided the services Ohio's most vulnerable students need to succeed.

Last session a pilot program was created in HB 123 that was specifically designed for some of the highest-performing DOPR E-schools. Like other online schools, DOPR E-schools are funded based on student participation, which requires extensive and burdensome tracking of student engagement. Basing funding on student participation or "seat time" poses a specific challenge for DOPR E-schools, which serve a population of predominately at-risk students. Despite a school's best efforts, it can often take time for a vulnerable student to actively engage in learning opportunities. Unfortunately, under Ohio's current funding model, those efforts and services go unfunded, simply because the student did not participate. DOPR schools often enroll students with long histories of truancy issues and challenges that made them fall behind in a traditional environment. Making matters worse, E-schools in Ohio do not receive funding for economically disadvantaged or English learning students like traditional brick and mortar schools. Unless a student has 100% attendance immediately upon enrolment, an E-school will not receive full funding. In other words, funding DOPR E-schools based on seat-time unfairly punishes DOPR schools for enrolling the very the students they are designed to help and try so desperately to get back on track.

The challenges DOPR E-schools encounter was apparent in an E-school funding report issued by ODE. That report found that DOPR E-schools serve 7,686 students (the report shows a total of 37,733 students being served by E-schools). That same report (Table 3) compares the headcount of students at each E-school and the FTE that each E-school generated during the course of the year. You will see that general education E-schools were funded at 66.7% of total student headcount. DOPR E-schools on the other hand received funding at 49.7% of total student headcount.¹

Unfortunately, numerous high-performing DOPR E-schools were facing closure over funding constraints, which is what led to the creation of the pilot program in HB 123. This pilot program allocates \$2.5 million to implement a three-tiered funding system that would provide schools with the financial support necessary to ensure students receive the initial resources needed to succeed, continue to fund DOPR E-schools based on participation, and reward student achievement. It is important to note, that funding would be capped at the current formula amount or (currently \$6,020 per student). In other words, the pilot program is not designed to increase funding per student, but instead aimed at allowing schools more ways to receive full funding for each student they educate.

The pilot program is only for the current school year and ODE must issue a report by December 31st. Even if ODE would recommend permanently implementing this new funding model, it would not be implemented in time to take effect for the 2021-2022 school year, forcing the DOPR E-schools to fall back into the dire financial situation they faced prior to the creation of the pilot program. We are asking the pilot to be extended for an additional two years, which will allow ODE additional time to compile data and issue recommendations on a long-term funding solution.

DOPR schools are not immune to the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. These schools have worked to continue serving their students during the crisis and face the same uncertainty as any other school entering the upcoming school year. By allowing DOPR schools to qualify for the Community School Support Program and extending the pilot program for DOPR E-schools, Ohio can ensure that they receive the funding necessary to continue serving Ohio's most at-risk populations.

GRADS Coalition

Buckeye Community School Coshocton Opportunity School Fairborn Digital Academy

Findlay Digital Academy Foxfire High School GOAL Digital Academy

Greater Ohio Virtual School Quaker Digital Academy

Townsend Community School TRECA Digital Academy

¹ <http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Finance-and-Funding/School-Payment-Reports/State-Funding-For-Schools/Community-School-Funding/Community-School-Funding-Information/Study-of-Internet-or-Computer-Based-Community-School-Funding-Models-1-1.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>