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## House Finance Committee

### Testimony on House Bill 110

**Lisa A. Gray, President, Ohio Excels**  
**March 11, 2021**

Chair Oelslager, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Crawley, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 110 (HB 110). My name is Lisa Gray, and I am the President of Ohio Excels.

Ohio Excels is a non-partisan, non-profit organization created by leaders of Ohio's business community to more consistently and deeply engage the business community in helping to improve educational outcomes for all Ohio students. Our focus on education includes early childhood, K-12, and postsecondary. 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.

Overall, Ohio Excels is pleased with the investments found in the budget. We would like to highlight a select few proposals from each of our focus areas: early childhood, K-12, higher education, and workforce.

#### Early Childhood Education

##### Early Childhood Investments

Ohio Excels believes it is critical to provide children from low-income families the opportunity to access high-quality early childhood education providers. It's a crucial strategy to help close achievement gaps that start at an early age, ensure more students are ready for success in Kindergarten, and are better prepared to meet the Third Grade Reading Guarantee. Ohio Excels is happy to see the Governor's introduced budget continues increasing the income eligibility threshold, moving it from 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) to 138%. However, Ohio Excels would like to increase this eligibility to at least 150% of FPL – as the budget does with special education students – for all low-income students this biennium, with the ultimate goal of reaching 200% in the next few years. At 150%, we can provide approximately 14,000 more children a high-quality start to their education.

## Step Up to Quality

Along with improving access to early childhood education, the state should continue its efforts to ensure those early childhood experiences are of high quality. The Step Up to Quality program – the state’s system for developing and rating high-quality providers – reached a milestone last year. All publicly funded early childhood education providers are now included in Step Up to Quality. Ohio Excels supports the program as it now works to continue to improve the quality of providers over the biennium. To help this, we are pleased that HB 110 includes \$20 million in each fiscal year to support early childhood education programs operating in smaller communities and other programs pursuing higher levels of quality.

## K-12 Education

### Student Wellness & Success Funding

Ohio Excels supports Governor DeWine’s proposal to continue and expand funding to provide wraparound supports for students. This budget increases the funding for Student Wellness and Success from \$675 million to \$1.1 billion over the biennium. The bill also maintains these funds outside of the K-12 school funding formula, which helps ensure that these funds are being used to support the critical and growing non-academic needs of Ohio’s students. While all districts and charter schools receive student wellness and success funds, the majority of funding is wisely targeted to communities with high poverty, supporting the students and communities that need it the most. Schools, working in partnership with community members, have the flexibility to develop services and initiatives to meet local needs. We encourage our schools and districts to maximize these resources by identifying other state investments found in the Departments of Health, Mental Health, ODJFS and the like to ensure our students are better prepared to learn and thrive.

### Quality Charter School Support Funding

Ohio Excels believes all students have a right to be in a high-quality school, whether that’s a traditional public school or a public charter school. We have seen many outstanding charter schools working with low-income students and achieving great results. This budget continues and improves a program that supports the highest-performing charter schools with additional funding. The budget increases funding to \$54 million each year of the biennium to meet growing demand and transitions the funding to the General Revenue Fund (GRF) – both important moves. Ohio Excels strongly supports this proposal. It will allow high-performing charter schools in Ohio to potentially expand and replicate, and it will help attract quality charter providers from other states to Ohio. Every child that attends a public school, whether it’s a traditional district school or a public charter school, deserves to be supported fairly by our tax dollars. This funding helps – but does not solve – the funding disparities between public charters and their district peers. Public charter schools often receive thousands of dollars less in funding for the same students. If this funding gap were closed for all public charter schools, we believe the state could provide many more high-quality options for Ohio’s students and families.

### Computer Science Education

Today’s economy is fueled by technology. As our world and economy continue to advance, computer science literacy is transitioning from optional knowledge to an essential skill. Ohio must focus on improving the computer science skills of its students so that they become more competitive in the workplace and help create new future-ready jobs in Ohio. This budget takes strong first steps toward that need. HB 110 requires that all students in Ohio, using a three-year phase in, have the option to enroll in computer science courses or general education courses that include the principles of computer science. The requirement begins for seniors in the 2022-23 school year and extends to all students in the 2024-25 school year. If a district or school is unable to offer a computer science course, students may choose from a list of Ohio Department of Education (ODE) approved outside providers. The course would be paid for using a method comparable to College Credit Plus. Finally, educator preparation programs will also be required, beginning with each educator candidate who enters the program in the 2022-23 school year, to receive instruction in computer science and computational thinking, a move that should allow us to better support our students and provide greater connections throughout a student’s educational experience.

The bill currently includes a waiver for districts and schools that are not ready to make these courses available to students. Given the multiyear transition, experience with remote learning gained this past year, and the imperative to provide computer science instruction to students, Ohio Excels would recommend reducing the waiver period. We believe the bill should offer a one-year waiver that may be renewed up to three times, not the proposed waiver that extends the requirement for up to five years.

### Other K-12 Education Provisions:

- High School Graduation Requirements: The budget makes some needed changes to account for the special circumstances related to students with disabilities and students transferring from another state or certain private schools. However, we are strongly opposed to changes to the Citizenship and Science seals that allow students to use regular high school courses in lieu of state test results to show mastery in those subjects. There are already non-test options for those seals, and it is critical that we give our long-term graduation requirements a chance to be implemented and work.
- Teach for America Support: We support the budget's \$2 million in each fiscal year to increase recruitment and training for Teach for America in Ohio. Teach for America recruits diverse, high-performing talent to enter the classroom. This will result in hundreds of new teaching corps members to serve in some of our hardest-to-staff school districts.
- Industry Credentials: We support the budget's investment of \$41 million for incentives to schools to offer credential preparation and to help students pay the cost of earning industry credentials in high school. We also believe that the state should prioritize funding for schools and districts with high enrollment of low-income students and require that all juniors and seniors be notified of this benefit, not just students currently in career-technical programs.

## Higher Education & Workforce

### FAFSA Completion

One of the primary goals of Ohio Excels is to make higher education – two and four-year degrees as well as technical programs and industry credentials – more affordable and accessible. The first step in that effort is making sure that more students fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Ohio Excels supports the Governor's move to make completing the FAFSA a new high school graduation requirement. We also think it is appropriate to have provisions allowing parents to opt-out of the requirement if they wish. However, by changing the FAFSA to an opt-out rather than opt-in for students, it will significantly increase the number of students aware that they qualify for financial support. Researchers have told us that Ohioans are leaving approximately \$87 million on the table in Pell grants, simply because they don't fill out the FAFSA.

We know that a requirement alone is not enough to move the needle. That is why we are happy to see that there are additional supports for school counselors to help students and families complete the FAFSA. The requirement also needs to be accompanied by a completion campaign that offers professional development to educators to better understand the FAFSA and outreach efforts to help communicate why completing the FAFSA is so important to students and families. The Ohio Department of Higher Education is currently implementing these supports this fiscal year using federal funds. The General Assembly should dedicate \$2.5 million in each fiscal year to continue these supports.

### Ohio College Opportunity Grant Funding

The cost of college and other training programs can be a barrier for many Ohioans. The Ohio College Opportunity Grant (OCOG) is Ohio's primary need-based aid program for higher education – two and four-year degrees as well as technical programs. Before the great recession in 2008, the program received up to \$225 million a year. OCOG was cut dramatically after the recession, and it only started to recover in the last biennium. The General Assembly boosted funding to \$148.2 million for this fiscal year before COVID-19 related cuts. While HB 110 increases funding

for OCOG to \$108.5 million by the end of the biennium, we strongly recommend restoring the funding for FY 2022 to \$148.2 million and increasing it again for FY 2023. OCOG is a critical piece of the state's effort to increase educational attainment, lower college debt, and give more low-income Ohioans access to great job opportunities.

### **TechCred**

To reach the state's attainment goal, we will need to upskill Ohio's current workforce. The budget continues and expands TechCred, the program designed to provide incumbent workers technology credentials aligned to Ohio's workforce needs. The budget allocates \$25 million in each fiscal year for grants to reimburse employers who connect employees to training providers. Ohio Excels strongly supports this program. Ohio's future economy is going to need more technology specialists and more technological literacy among all of its workforce to remain competitive.

### **Other Higher Education Provisions:**

- **Removing Barriers:** The budget includes two provisions that will help remove barriers to higher education and increase access for more Ohioans. First, the budget gives the Chancellor the ability to set rules for when higher education institutions can and cannot withhold transcripts – a common barrier for students interested in continuing their education. Second, the budget allows the Chancellor to set alternative ways to demonstrate college readiness for College Credit Plus other than the ACT/SAT. We hope that these provisions will open up higher education opportunities to more students.

## **Other Provisions**

### **Local Partnerships**

Ohio is fortunate to have many local partnerships focused on increasing the educational attainment of their region. Called cradle to career partnerships (C2Cs), these collaboratives bring together education institutions, community organizations, and the business community to identify and implement collaborative initiatives to help improve students' success. However, only 17 of 88 counties benefit from these partnerships at this time. Ohio Excels, as well as the Complete to Compete attainment coalition, recommend that the General Assembly include \$1 million in seed funding each year to create and expand cradle to career partnerships to support students and families where they do not currently exist.

### **Broadband Expansion**

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a mass experiment of the state's capability to deliver online education, which, in turn, highlighted the importance and limitations of Ohio's broadband internet network. A broadband connection is essential for students to participate in remote learning opportunities, but it also opens Ohioans to remote work opportunities and telehealth services. Ohio Excels supports the state's efforts to expand broadband in the budget and the other bills currently under consideration by the General Assembly.

In conclusion, Ohio Excels is excited about many elements in the budget proposal. We believe that these investments will go a long way to supporting our students, educators, and schools. Ohio Excels look forward to collaborating with policymakers to help improve the lives of all of our students. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.