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House Primary & Secondary Education Committee

Testimony on House Bill 67

Lisa A. Gray, President, Ohio Excels
February 23, 2021

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Bird, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 67 (HB 67). 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.

COVID-19 has disrupted every part of society, including education. Students and educators across Ohio, especially low-income students in urban and rural areas, are facing an unprecedented challenge. We are grateful for the educators dedicated to making the 2020-21 school year work for students. We know it has not been easy, and we appreciate those that have gone above and beyond, both inside and outside of the classroom, to ensure that are students are receiving the support they need.

Given the disruptions caused by the pandemic, there is clearly a need for grace and flexibility with how the state evaluates the performance of districts and schools for the 2020-21 school year. **This is why we supported the provisions in the last General Assembly's HB 409 that created a one-year pause in state report card grades and consequences related to the report cards.** With the consequences and high stakes removed, this year's assessments can simply focus on identifying how our students are performing throughout the state.

However, HB 67 proposes to go further and eliminate state assessments for the second year in a row. **Ohio Excels strongly opposes the provisions in this bill that eliminate the state assessments for this school year.** We support the recently released guidance from the U.S. Department of Education that offers waivers related to school and district accountability, continues to require the administration of state assessments, and maintains public reporting of data. Now is a time when we need more information, not less. To be clear, it is extremely difficult to perfectly deliver uniform, high-quality education during this pandemic. This is not about pointing fingers or assigning blame – HB 409 made sure of that. Instead, having statewide assessment results will provide parents, educators, and state policymakers a consistent view of student performance. The results will allow policymakers to direct the supports, resources, and interventions necessary to catch students up to the districts, schools, and students most in need of help.

While state assessments are important for state policymakers, the primary users and audiences of state assessments are parents and families. Parents want to know how their children are performing academically, and they want to use state assessment to find out. For most parents, telling them their child is behind or ahead is not enough. They want more precision. How far behind? One month, three months, a year? In what subjects – math, reading, science? According to our [recent poll of parents](#), about eight out of ten parents want to continue statewide assessments to measure their child’s academic progress at the end of the 2020-2021 school year. Eight out of ten parents also want public reporting on student learning and assessment results during this current school year. They are hungry for specifics.

Because of the role assessments play in monitoring and improving equity, support for assessments is a bipartisan issue. When the U.S. Department of Education notified states that federal assessments will not be waived, the move was supported by a [broad coalition of advocacy groups](#), including the Center for American Progress, the National Urban League, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Education Trust, National Center for Learning Disabilities, League of United Latin American Citizens, and the Foundation for Excellence in Education (commonly known as ExcelinEd). Without assessments this year, Ohio will go two years without knowing specifically how achievement gaps may be changing.

Educators have told us that many of their students are not learning as much as they would in a normal school year. That is not surprising given the disruptions. **State assessments will help policymakers find out where students are falling behind and by how much.** This will allow state leaders to direct the billions of dollars in federal funds to the students who need the most support. We must strategically target these one-time resources to our students with the greatest needs. We should not take a “peanut butter spreading” approach to the distribution of resources. State assessments will also allow us to highlight bright spots throughout the state. These learnings will allow us to share remote instruction strategies, academic interventions, and other supports that have been effective with our students in other schools, districts, and communities. There have been many unique approaches to educating students this past year. Let’s identify those that have worked and broadly share the results.

Before concluding today, I’d like to address a few common misconceptions that often come up in the debate over state assessments.

Time Away from Instruction: There are concerns about the amount of time students spend on state assessments. State assessments are between [2.5 and 3.5 hours in length](#), and most students take two or three of them a year beginning in the third grade. Even when accounting for an hour or two of preparation, this means that **state assessments take a very small fraction of the nearly 1,000 hours of minimum instruction time required each school year** – typically less than 1% of the school year. We believe taking the time to measure our students’ progress is critical, especially now.

Assessment Windows: The state uses assessment windows to give local school districts flexibility on when they administer the assessments. In fact, the Ohio Department of Education recently [extended the assessments window](#) for this school year. This means that districts will have, in some cases, up to seven weeks to give each student their two or three required state assessments. To be clear, this doesn't mean an individual student is taking assessments for seven weeks. It means that **local educators have additional flexibility for when assessments are administered so as to address potential disruptions** and use time more efficiently.

Assessment Results: There are concerns about when the results from the state assessments come back. By law, all state assessment results must be returned to districts by the end of June each year. This provides educators opportunities to use the assessment results to help students during the summer months and in planning for the next school year.

Instructional Delivery Methods: Finally, it is important to note that not all students in Ohio have been attending school remotely this year. According to data from the Ohio Department of Education, compiled from district reporting, [roughly half of students](#) have been in classrooms at least part of the week throughout this school year. As of last week, [only nine school districts](#) reported that they were fully remote. With the vaccine rollout for educators underway, **nearly all school districts will be in-person at least part of the week by the end of March**. A [new report](#) from researchers at the Ohio State University showed that, even last fall, 81 percent of third grade students were able to take the state's reading assessment.

That same report confirmed that many students are experiencing learning loss – a total decline statewide approximately equal to one-third of a year's worth of learning. It also showed that some districts did not experience significant declines. However, more troublingly, it showed that black students and economically disadvantaged students are experiencing score declines at a higher rate than their white and higher-income peers.

The state faces a unique and monumental challenge – to help students overcome an education crisis that has affected each school, educator, family, and student differently. Insights from this year's assessment results are critical for state policymakers, educators, and parents as they start work to help each child. We strongly urge you to maintain state assessments this school year to provide critical information in helping our students improve.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you might have at this time.