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House Primary & Secondary Education Committee Testimony on Substitute Senate Bill 178

Lisa A. Gray, Ohio Excels
December 11, 2022

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Bird, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee.

My name is Lisa Gray, and I am the President of Ohio Excels. I appreciate this opportunity to address your committee on behalf of Ohio Excels and other state business organizations in Ohio, namely the Ohio Business Roundtable (OBRT), the National Federation of Independent Businesses in Ohio (NFIB), and three regional business associations, Cincinnati Business Committee (CBC), Columbus Partnership (CP), and the Greater Cleveland Partnership (GCP) in support of Substitute Senate Bill 178. This testimony represents support from the breadth of Ohio's business community, from our smallest to our largest employers. Descriptions of each of these organizations are included at the end of my testimony.

It is a basic tenet of effective business management that any organization, whether it's in the public or private sector, must have clear lines of authority, policymaking, and fiscal responsibility in order to succeed. And those well-defined governance roles must also result in a clear line of accountability for the organization's success or failure.

Unfortunately, that can't be said about the way Ohio governs its state-level education system, where lines of authority for policymaking, budget-setting, and accountability are increasingly split among a fractured set of policymakers. It's a broken system that has not maximized service and efforts for our students, their teachers, their parents, and all of us who support Ohio schools with our taxes.

Sadly, this discontinuity is not a flaw, but a purposeful feature that has been built into our education system. So, despite the best efforts of students, parents, teachers, supportive stakeholders – and this legislature – confusion and misalignment are all too often the result.

In Ohio, as in every other state, voters hold their governor and state legislators largely responsible for the success or failure of their schools, whether that's measured by graduation rates, reading scores, or career readiness. But too often, Ohio governors and legislators bear the public's blame when schools struggle, even though the current system denies them full oversight to make things better. Too much of that authority – including *your* authority as legislators – has been shifted elsewhere to a little-known, partly elected, partly appointed body: the State Board of Education. I doubt that many members of the public are aware of who their representative on the state school board might be or that a State Board of Education even exists. But they know who the governor is. And legislators work hard to ensure that voters know who represents them in Columbus.

It's long past time to reform our system. This is not an indictment of all those who currently sit on the State Board of Education or lead the Ohio Department of Education. It is about the best way to govern public education in Ohio, particularly in light of Ohio's workforce needs and the ongoing educational challenges we face.

We believe that a new education governance structure for Ohio should be about accountability, responsiveness, and relevance in today's world. It should have clear lines of authority from policymaking, budget-setting, legislative intent, and executive coordination with other arms of government. It should also establish the state's top education official as a member of the governor's cabinet with an opportunity – an obligation, really – to better collaborate with other departments and agencies on strategically aligned policies. Ultimately, the responsibility for the success of our schools lies with the governor and legislators.

Because of the current lack of strategic alignment, Ohio Excels and the listed business associations fully support Substitute Senate Bill 178 and its efforts to move our system of education governance in a new direction. This is a plan that keeps the State Board of Education in place, but the plan focuses its work on the things that the board does best. It also creates critical strategic alignment of our education and workforce preparation programs through the new Department of Education and Workforce (DEW). And perhaps most importantly, allows Ohio's governors, with the advice and consent of the Senate, to appoint the director of this new cabinet agency.

We do, however, have suggestions for what we believe are improvements to the proposed legislation. First, we appreciate the sponsor's goal of elevating career education in our schools. In a recent poll we conducted, 90% of public-school parents believed that Ohio should place a higher priority on career education, and 80% of parents would like their children to start on a career path before they leave high school and enter college or the workforce. However, we are concerned that creating a separate division of the new agency may unintentionally silo career education at a time when it needs to be more integrated into the curriculum for all students, starting no later than 5th or 6th grade. We recommend removing this provision from the bill and exploring other ways to promote the critical nature of career education for all our students. This could include requiring career exposure in earlier grades and career education to be front and center in the new agency's strategic plan.

Secondly, we want to ensure that the critical role of public participation and input is maintained. We believe this can happen, just like it does in other state agencies, through the Chapter 119 public hearing process already required in state law. This section of code specifically identifies the rules and procedures agencies must adopt before completing their rule making roles. We recommend that Substitute SB 178 highlight and reinforce this public input opportunity.

Since the introduction of this bill, we have heard criticism about its length and the urgency by which it is moving through the legislative process. On both points we would respectfully disagree. This bill, while long in minor edits and strikethroughs, really is only about 15 pages in substantive length. On the second point, the issue of how to govern education in Ohio and who should have state responsibility and oversight has been debated for decades under Democratic and Republican administrations. Furthermore, we have been without a permanent leader at the Ohio Department of Education for over a year, and given the timelines and debates occurring, it is unlikely we will have one soon. This is by no means a criticism of Interim State Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Stephanie Siddens or her team as we believe they have done a terrific job under very difficult circumstances. Not only does she and her

staff deserve an answer about next steps, but more importantly, after coming off the pandemic, our students, families, and educators deserve the assurance of steadfast leadership now – not in another year.

After too many years of passing responsibility through an unclear and unworkable chain of command, Ohio Excels, the Ohio Business Roundtable, and the National Federation of Independent Businesses in Ohio, the Cincinnati Business Committee, the Columbus Partnership, and the Greater Cleveland Partnership are convinced that it's time to head in a new direction. When our schools succeed, we all succeed. This is an opportunity Ohio, and our children can't afford to miss.

Thank you, and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Description of Organizations Endorsing this Testimony:

Ohio Excels is a non-partisan, non-profit organization created by leaders of Ohio's business community to engage the business community more consistently and deeply in efforts to help improve educational outcomes for all Ohio students. Our focus includes early childhood, K-12, and postsecondary education. And in support of that mission, we are committed to working with the broader business community, policymakers, educators, and other community leaders to support our students, educators, and schools.

Ohio Business Roundtable is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization comprised of over 100 presidents and CEOs of Ohio's top companies, 75 of which are headquartered in the state and more than one third of which are Fortune 1000 companies. Collectively, the members employ nearly 500,000 Ohioans and generate a revenue exceeding \$1.48 trillion.

National Federation of Independent Business represents nearly 21,000 governing members. By way of background, a typical NFIB member in Ohio employs 20 or fewer and does less than \$2 million in annual receipts. Their members come from all industry types, each of the 88 counties, and range in size from sole proprietors to large operations employing hundreds.

Cincinnati Business Committee is an organization of chief executives from companies in the Greater Cincinnati area committed to identifying and providing leadership on selected issues. The members will consider initiatives that are especially important to the long-term economic vitality and well-being of the Greater Cincinnati community and in which the CBC's active involvement will make a major difference. Special emphasis is placed on economic development, education, and government affairs.

Columbus Partnership is a non-profit, membership-based leadership organization of 80 chairpersons, chief executive officers and senior executives from the Region's leading businesses and institutions. Our members include Fortune 500 CEOs, as well as the leaders of top universities and the world's largest private, nonprofit research and development organization. The Partnership's economic development organization, One Columbus, serves as the business location resource for companies across Central Ohio and around the world as they grow, innovate, and compete within the global economy. Our experienced team has worked with hundreds of companies and helped to secure over \$10 billion of capital investment, 50,000 direct jobs and more than \$2 billion of new payroll across the Columbus Region

Greater Cleveland Partnership is the region's leading economic development organization and with over 12,000 members, the largest metropolitan chamber of commerce in the nation. Guided by a board of corporate and entrepreneurial CEOs, the organization focuses on strategic initiatives, business services, and advocacy to build a vibrant business environment and region for small businesses, middle-market companies, and global corporations. It includes the Council of Smaller Enterprises ([COSE](#)) and [Cleveland Development Advisors](#), a real estate development affiliate. GCP is committed to working with private, civic, and public partners to accelerate growth and prosperity to propel Greater Cleveland towards being one of the Great Regions in the Great Lakes.