



Greater Ohio Virtual School

1879 Deerfield Road, Lebanon, OH 45036

Senate Finance Committee

HB 110

Proponent Testimony

May 17, 2021

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for considering this testimony today. My name is Shawn E. Lenney, and I am the Executive Director of the Greater Ohio Virtual School (GOVS), a dropout prevention and recovery e-school serving over 500 students throughout the state of Ohio. We are located at the Warren County Educational Service Center in Lebanon, Ohio, and are currently sponsored by St Aloysius. We are advocating in support of language in HB 110 that would extend the DOPR e-school pilot program created last session for an additional two years.

The Greater Ohio Virtual School was created in 2002 as an alternative option for students in Warren County who were attending the Electronic School of Tomorrow (E.C.O.T). Since its inception, our school has graduated over 1700 students, including a school-record 170 students during the 2019-2020 school year. Our governing board consists of five Warren County Superintendents including Pat Dubbs, Superintendent of the Wayne Local School District, Tom Isaacs, Superintendent of the Warren County Educational Service Center, Larry Hook, Superintendent of Springboro City School District, Tim Ackermann, Superintendent of the Kings Local School District, and Dr. Mike Sanders, Superintendent of the Franklin City School District. In addition to these five school districts, GOVS works with over 120 different school districts throughout the state of Ohio, forming beneficial relationships to offer at-risk students an alternate pathway to receive their diploma. The Greater Ohio Virtual School was recently awarded the Excellence in Education Award at the GEMS of Excellence Awards banquet hosted by the Mason Deerfield Chamber of Commerce. In front of over 400 area businesses, elected officials, and residents, the Greater Ohio Virtual School was honored for the role it plays in supporting at-risk students in the area.

Today, I am advocating on behalf of language in HB 110 that would extend the DOPR e-school pilot program that was created in HB 123 last session for an additional two years in the state operating budget (HB 110). It is incredibly challenging to put into words the struggles our school has endured since 2015. Many of my colleagues at similar schools would agree that we have been challenged with what would seem an impossible task but have overcome in so many ways while improving accountability at all of our schools. The lasting hurdle that has proven to be unobtainable has been school funding. Specifically, funding e-schools strictly on seat time when dealing with a school whose population consists predominantly of at-risk students. While we have spent countless amounts of time, resources, and energy on finding ways to get at-risk students to engage, we still can't get around the simple fact that many of those elements go unfunded at our schools. If you were to ask the Ohio Department of Education or the State Auditor's office what they think of our ability to track and document student attendance and seat-time, you would hear very favorable feedback concerning the work we have done. Yet, our funding has been cut by almost 50% since 2017. How is this possible? When funding is strictly done by seat time, it punishes our school for the type of student with which we are working. Many of those students are coming to us with a lengthy background of truancy, substance abuse, homelessness, medical situations, and anxiety issues that have made them unsuccessful. Funding by seat time means that those students,



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with years of baggage accumulated from traditional schools, will not receive full funding at GOVS unless they have 100 percent attendance immediately. Again, the expectation is that we have to have 100 percent attendance if we are to receive full funding.

Truancy issues are not the only at-risk definitions our students carry with them as they search for a non-traditional way to receive their diploma. At-risk doesn't always equal low achieving. Many of our students come to us with anxiety issues, medical issues, and bullying issues that have held them back in the traditional setting. Often, those students can work quickly and efficiently when the barriers they have been battling at their traditional school are eliminated. Those students sometimes don't need 920 hours to earn five credits for the year or a few credits to get them back on track. In this scenario, those high achieving students who have made progress without the requirement of 920 hours hurt the Greater Ohio Virtual School financially because we only receive funding based on their seat time. I want to emphasize that our best and most highly performing students hurt us financially.

This past December, Governor DeWine signed HB 123 into law. Within that bill was an amendment to create a 1-year pilot program to help schools like the Greater Ohio Virtual School. The amendment contained three-tiered funding system that provides solutions to the funding issues that have been created when only taking into consideration seat time for funding. Tier one, or base funding, fills the large funding void for resources used to onboard and work with truant students to get them to re-engage. There are costs associated with enrolling a student and working with them to engage. Those costs could range from \$1000 to \$2000 dollars depending on the school and the offered supports. We give each student a Chromebook, wireless MiFi unit, free wireless connectivity, free tutoring services, access to the curriculum and many other school related resources just to get the students functioning at the school. If a student enrolls and doesn't do anything, we do not receive any funding for the resources listed above because our funding is strictly based on seat time and documented hours. There is a high probability that a typical student that enrolls in a DOPR school might not engage appropriately, and it will take time, resources, and possible withdraw and re-enrollment to wait for the light to turn on for these students. Tier two is the current system of documenting seat time so we can continue to track and monitor how our students are engaging at our schools. The third and final tier offers funding for achievement or the completion of credits. Without this new pilot program, the Greater Ohio School would have closed last summer in the middle of a pandemic forcing hundreds of students to find a new school.

The pilot program requires the Ohio Department of Education to issue a report by December 31, 2021. It also requires participating schools to develop a plan and work with the Ohio Department of Education on ways to increase student engagement. The \$2.5 million for the pilot program is for Fiscal Year 21, which means there will be no additional funding for the 2021-2022 school year, even if ODE's report on the pilot recommends the permanent implementation of the 3-tiered funding model. This is the reason we are advocating for the extension of the pilot for two years to ensure that schools can continue to operate as the Ohio Department of Education is collecting data and developing long-term recommendations. I would like to thank the House for including this extension in their version of HB 110.

What will we do with the extra funding? We have been busy creating a plan for increased student engagement and increased focus on student wellness based on the needs of our students. Over the past three years, due to the funding gaps, we have been forced to limit our enrollment while eliminating multiple staff positions and reduce our teacher and tutor pay. We are dealing with students who need more support and resources than the typical student and we simply don't have access to the resources



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anymore. We recently had the unfortunate experience of dealing with a student who committed suicide. This is the fourth suicide in the past three years. During that time, we have dealt with multiple students who have been murdered, incarcerated, runaway, teen pregnancy, and just about every type of wall you could put in front of a student to keep them from academic success. With this in mind we will use the additional funds created by the pilot program to add student wellness positions. A fulltime resource coordinator, mental therapist, and additional guidance counselor are all part of our plan for next year and beyond. We plan to change our supplemental mentoring program to a full or part time Academic Coach model allowing for more time to monitor lesson completion, track engagement, and provide guidance and support to students on a more frequent basis. Finally, we are planning to open a permanent drop-in facility that will provide students a location to attain resources and services throughout the day. All of this is incredibly exciting for the future of our school and the well-being of our students. None of this, however, will be a reality, unless the pilot program is extended and the work with the Ohio Department of Education continues in an effort to permanently fund dropout prevention and recovery E-schools appropriately.

Thank you for considering my comments today, I urge your support for extending this pilot program that is so critical for schools like ours.