FINDLAY DIGITAL ACADEMY
Where Learning Fits You™

Rosemary Rooker, Superintendent ◆ Michael Brand, Principal ◆ Stephen Earnest, Treasurer

Ohio Senate Finance Committee
HB 110
May 17, 2021

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Gavarone, and Ranking Member Sykes, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony in support of the proposed extension in HB 110 of the Dropout Prevention and Recovery E-Schools pilot program, which was created in HB 123 from last session. My name is Rosemary Rooker, and I am the Superintendent of Findlay Digital Academy (FDA), a Dropout Prevention E-School. We are a district sponsored community school located in northwest Ohio in Hancock County, where we serve students in grades 9-12. Our students originate from 15 surrounding school districts, and our enrollment rages from 150-170 students.

Over the past 16 years, our method of delivery has proven to be successful for students that have chosen a non-traditional approach to education. FDA has consistently earned ratings of Meets and Exceeds Standards on the Dropout Prevention School Report Card. Our graduation rates have been some of the highest in the state for similar schools. We have found this success by offering an intensive program that uses mentors to build relationships with students while also supporting them academically. Our community recognizes the value of our school and has been supportive in our mission.

As you are likely aware, the majority of students that attend DOPR schools have experienced trauma in their lives and are at-risk of dropping out of school. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on families throughout our state, motivation and engagement for this group of students remains a continuous challenge. We continue to identify numerous students who have fallen even farther behind and additionally are dealing with the social and emotional effects of this pandemic. Without alternatives such as our program, many of these students would be high school dropouts living in our communities with the probability of community dependence for an indefinite amount of time.

DOPR E-schools, like all other E-schools, are tied to a funding model that moved from a system of funding based on enrollment of students to a participation-based model. The reality is that funding this population of at-risk students based on student engagement in learning opportunities does not support the cost of educating some of the most vulnerable students in our communities. Additionally, this underfunding of E-schools questions the belief of education equality. There are many traditional school districts who have been operating E-schools and receive full funding for their E-school students.

Through the passage of HB 123 last session legislators acknowledged the need for a different funding model for the DOPR e-schools. A pilot program to change how DOPR E-school students enrolled in grades eight through twelve are funded was established for fiscal year 2021. Findlay Digital Academy along with five other DOPR E-schools were eligible to participate in this pilot in which additional funding would be based on a multiple tiered model. With this model, calculations for funding would take into account
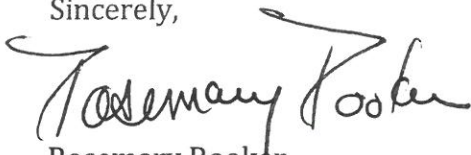
not only "engagement in learning opportunities" by students, but also includes funding for "course completions" and a "base" funding formula tied to the amount of time the student is enrolled to help defray costs of educating students. With all of these elements, the total payment per student is capped at the current formula amount.

Within a very short timeframe of one year, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) and the participating E-schools are tasked with gathering data and studying the effects of this alternative model. Upon completion of the pilot program, and not later than December 31, 2021, the ODE is tasked with issuing a report on this program. Information to be collected and reviewed includes:
- analyzing time, resources and costs associated with enrolling students and preparing them to engage in learning opportunities;
- analyzing time and cost associated with providing counseling and other supports to students;
- analyzing student enrollment and participation data;
- analyzing individualized student plans;
- analyzing strategies used to improve student engagement and the percentage of participation in learning opportunities

With schools still managing all of the effects from COVID-19, I would maintain that a thorough analysis of all of this information requires additional time. I would advocate that the pilot program be extended for an additional two years, through fiscal year 2023. As being a part of this pilot, I am hopeful that the participating schools and the ODE can work together to identify the pros and cons of this pilot and work together to issue a comprehensive report with recommendations that will provide an equitable funding solution for Ohio's Dropout Prevention/Recovery E-Schools. I urge your support for this extension, which is included in the House-passed version of HB 110.

Sincerely,

Rosemary Rooker
Superintendent, Findlay Digital Academy