



**Proponent Testimony on Senate Bill 1  
House Economic and Workforce Development Committee**

Thank you, Chair Swearingen, Vice Chair Santucci, Ranking Member Upchurch, and House Economic and Workforce Development Committee members for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony today on Substitute Senate Bill 1.

My name is Michael Petrilli, and I am President of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The Fordham Institute is an education-focused nonprofit that conducts research, analysis, and policy advocacy with offices in Columbus, Dayton, and Washington, D.C. Our Dayton office, through the affiliated Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, is also a community school sponsor.

I am here today to testify in support of Senate Bill 1. This legislation would represent a major restructuring of education governance in Ohio and would move the state toward a more coordinated, coherent approach to K-12 and workforce-development policy implementation.

Why is a change necessary? Ohio students today encounter challenges that they are too often ill-equipped to face. We've all heard the data on K-12 education. But since the pandemic, it's gotten even worse. On Ohio's state tests only 53 percent of eighth grade students are proficient in English and only 43 percent are on grade level in math. Using the higher—college ready—NAEP standards, Ohio eighth grade proficiency numbers dip to 33 percent in reading and 29 percent in math. Low-income students and students of color post even lower scores. It's clear that the Buckeye State must find ways to improve student achievement in K-12 education. For those inclined to discount test scores, the long-term data indicates that students struggle after K-12. While around 53 percent of Ohio high school graduates enroll in a college or university, only about 30 percent actually go on to earn two- or four-year degrees. These numbers shouldn't be surprising given that even with the rise of co-requisite remediation, one in five Ohio students going to college still requires non-credit bearing remedial coursework.

Quite simply, too many students leaving high school today are ready for neither college nor work. Ohio's economic future and—just as important—the lives and long-term happiness of Ohio citizens demands change.

What's this have to do with the state board? The board has a host of responsibilities under current law (3301.07 ORC), but probably it's most important is to "exercise leadership in the improvement of public education in the state." This duty—always paramount—has become especially crucial in the wake of the pandemic, during which hundreds of thousands of Ohio students fell behind academically. Black and

Hispanic students, those with special needs, and children from low-income backgrounds have been hit the hardest.

Unfortunately, on this front, the most important to Ohio's students—the board has fallen short. Before expounding on this view, I want to make clear the deep respect that those of us at the Fordham Institute have for members of the state board of education—both past and present. My colleagues have testified before and interacted with board members and believe they are doing their best to make a difference on behalf of students. In many ways, it's a thankless job. It's a board that is designed in a way that—through no fault of its members—prevents it from functioning efficiently and implementing the education laws that the legislature passes. A board with nineteen voting members—split between appointees and elected members—is a recipe for gridlock, discord, and a lack of accountability. And anyone paying attention over the past few years has seen that and more.

Areas where the board and/or its structure has hurt the state's efforts to improve public education:

**1. Failure to focus on the big things**—Entirely too much time in board meetings has been spent discussing parliamentary procedure and political resolutions that are under the purview of the General Assembly and not the state board.

**2. Lowering expectations for students**—On multiple occasions, the state board pushed to lower Ohio's graduation requirements and urged lawmakers to grant diplomas for things such as attendance, capstone projects, and volunteer hours. More recently, the board passed a resolution urging the legislature to drop the retention requirement for third graders who cannot read.

**3. Moves too slowly**—From hiring a new state superintendent to implementing the ACE ESA program to conducting five-year rule reviews, the state board's slow committee process and failure to act in a timely manner on these and other issues is detrimental to students and often subverts the intent of the legislature.

**4. Lack of accountability**—At the end of the day, under Ohio's current education governance structure neither the governor nor the state board has ultimate authority and responsibility for improving educational outcomes. Each can—quite plausibly—stand and point the finger at the other when things don't work out as hoped. From Academic Distress Commissions to charter school sponsor evaluations—when implementation went awry no one was ever really accountable.

To reiterate, I stand in support of SB 1. It would call upon governors to take on a stronger leadership role in agenda setting, policy design, and the implementation of initiatives aimed at improving readiness for college and career. In the realm of K–12, Ohio has a fragmented system in which governors rightly run for office on how to improve education but an almost anonymous state board of education—with less accountability as a result—actually exerts the most influence over policy implementation. The result has been uninspiring academic achievement which creates hardships for Ohio students. By granting the governor greater leadership over education, the state will finally have some semblance of accountability for education outcomes.

SB 1 would also create conditions that allow education and workforce initiatives to be vigorously implemented. The bill's more unified approach—including creating a deputy director for career and technical education—is critical as data continue to show that too many young people struggle to make transitions from high school to career. The improved alignment of K–12 and career and technical education systems should help to set consistent expectations, align policy development and information systems, and create a culture of shared responsibility for the well-being of young people from elementary school to their first jobs.

Governor DeWine and future governors—regardless of party—should be allowed to oversee a unified state education and workforce agency. SB 1 would significantly improve the likelihood that initiatives are faithfully carried out. This is surely why governors of both parties, including Governors Celeste, Voinovich, Strickland, and Kasich, have at times sought more formal authority in primary-secondary education. Of course, this is not to say that governors should always get what they want: Checks and balances are essential to any governing model. But the check on the governor should come primarily via the legislature and, of course, through the will of the people who ultimately hold him or her accountable at the ballot box.

The time is right to make these changes. Post-pandemic, Ohio students are facing tremendous challenges to get back on track. The Buckeye State needs strong, aligned, bold leadership to improve its education system. Unfortunately, the current governance structure for K-12 education has proven not to be up to the task. While restructuring alone may not deliver the results Ohio needs to secure its future prosperity, the changes proposed in SB1 would create conditions that promise more seamless transitions for students and a renewed accountability around academic achievement.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.