



# THE BUCKEYE INSTITUTE

## **Reforming Ohio's Education Bureaucracy to Meet 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenges**

Interested Party Testimony  
Ohio House Economic and Workforce Development Committee  
Ohio Senate Bill 1

Greg R. Lawson, Research Fellow  
The Buckeye Institute

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As Prepared for Delivery

Thank you, Chair Swearingen, Vice Chair Santucci, Ranking Member Upchurch, and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding Ohio Senate Bill 1.

My name is Greg R. Lawson. I am a research fellow at **The Buckeye Institute**, an independent research and educational institution—a think tank—whose mission is to advance free-market public policy in the states.

**State, local**, and **business** leaders have long complained that Ohio’s education system does not sufficiently prepare high school graduates for the workforce, leaving employers without skilled employees and many young people without the knowledge they need to earn a living, afford a house, or support a family. Senate Bill 1 pursues reforms that should help.

The Ohio Constitution **requires** a State Board of Education, but it leaves the selection of members and the enumeration of its powers and duties up to the General Assembly. Currently, the 19-member board is comprised of voter-elected members and several gubernatorial appointees. It enjoys a **broad purview** over a range of issues such as academic standards, instructional materials, school buildings, transportation, and administrative responsibilities. Unfortunately, the board’s hybrid composition and extensive responsibilities have hindered its responsiveness and effectiveness in a rapidly changing environment. More than 16 months have lapsed, for example, since the last state superintendent announced retirement in September 2021 and the board still (still!) **has not hired** a permanent replacement. Governor Voinovich observed more than three decades ago that the State Board of Education has too much on its plate, and **the plate** has only gotten fuller since then. The time for reform is now.

The board has also become increasingly mired in **politically charged discussions** rather than attending to the important matters at-hand, namely closing learning gaps and preparing graduates for productive employment. The board’s distractions are particularly worrisome in the wake of historically **poor performance and academic decline** following the COVID school closures.

Ohio State University researchers, for example, **determined** that between March 2020 (when schools began closing due to the pandemic) through April 2021, K-12 students lost the equivalent of between one-half and one full year of learning in math, and between one-third and one-half of a year of learning in English language arts (ELA). Students already performing below grade level prior to the shutdown lost more than those performing at or above grade level. Hybrid instruction that included limited in-classroom as well as remote instruction led to a significant 10 percent drop in ELA performance. And students who remained in fully remote learning environments suffered nearly three times the learning loss as those who maintained in-person instruction. A subsequent **study** found ELA improvement for some students in the fall of 2021, but many students remained months behind, and the achievement gaps with minority students persisted.

Even before the pandemic, eighth grade black students scored 10 percent lower in 2003 and 12 percent lower in 2019 than white students in math, with a similar gap in reading according to the **National Assessment of Educational Progress**, known as the Nation’s Report Card. Hispanic eighth-grade math students scored six percent below white students in 2003 and 2019,

and the gap in reading grew from one percent in 2003 to five percent in 2019. Closing these learning gaps and regaining lost ground will be critical to Ohio's new economic development and making the most of corporate investments.

Continued underperformance in K-12 education will mean a weaker workforce in the future. Intel and Honda EV batter plants have given Ohio tremendous job growth opportunities that must not be squandered. Ohio must improve K-12 education to keep pace with 21<sup>st</sup> century employers and remain a major player in America's increasingly hi-tech economy.

Further, the board's mismanaged oversight of the Afterschool Child Enrichment Program (ACE) raises eyebrows. ACE's \$500 education savings accounts were intentionally designed to deliver financial resources to help parents pay for tutoring and curriculum enhancements so that students can overcome some of the academic setbacks suffered during the pandemic. The State Board of Education is responsible to oversee the program and ensure that parents receive the funds. That oversight has largely failed so far, with less than 10 percent of the 250,000 students receiving the appropriated funds.

Senate Bill 1 will not solve all the problems facing our public schools, but it can help address them in several ways.

First, the bill trims the school board's over-extended responsibilities, redirecting its attention to the critical functions of teacher licensure and administrative issues. Second, Senate Bill 1 empowers a revamped Department of Education and Workforce to concentrate on administering programs like ACE, resolving **lingering transportation issues** across school districts, and preparing students for their futures. Third, upon enactment, the reconfigured Department of Education will be directly accountable to the governor—who can then apply the necessary pressure to the education bureaucracy to get results.

Senate Bill 1 splits the board into two divisions: one focusing on traditional K-12 education; the other focusing on students pursuing careers in technology or the trades. Wisely, each division will be run by deputy directors that sit on the Governor's Executive Workforce Board, creating a meaningful connection between Ohio's public education system and the businesses that will be hiring its students. Given some concerns about how these reforms will affect accountability, it is important to make clear that the Ohio Senate must approve the new director and deputy directors, which will help ensure that the voters will have a say in these appointments.

Finally, it may be helpful to clarify the bill's language regarding how a new focus on career readiness will be integrated in the new department.

Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions that the Committee might have.

### ***About The Buckeye Institute***

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