



FINDLAY DIGITAL ACADEMY

Where Learning Fits You™

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Interested Party Testimony on House Bill 33 House Primary and Secondary Education Subcommittee March 23, 2023

Thank you, Chair Richardson, Ranking Member Isaacsohn, and members of the House Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony on HB 33, the state's budget bill for fiscal years 2024 and 2025 and the need to make permanent the tiered-funding model used in the Dropout Prevention E-Schools' pilot created in HB 123.

My name is Rosemary Rooker, and I am the Superintendent of Findlay Digital Academy (FDA), a Dropout Prevention and Recovery (DOPR) E-School. We are a district-sponsored community school, located in northwest Ohio in Hancock County, where we serve students in grades 9-12, through the age of 21, with currently 69% of our students identified as Economically Disadvantaged. Our students originate from 15 surrounding school districts, and this year our enrollment has increased ranging from having 180-200 students enrolled at one time.

Over the past 17 years, FDA's method of delivery has proven to be successful for students that have chosen a non-traditional on-line learning 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, and our students are earning credentials to prepare them for work after graduation. 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 aware, the majority of students that attend DOPR schools have experienced trauma in their lives and are at risk of dropping out of school. These students have attended the traditional brick and mortar schools and for a variety of reasons have not been successful. Many of our students work 40 hours a week to help support their families; many are young moms and cannot access a traditional program but still want to earn their diploma. Additionally, many of our students experience mental health issues, but with our model, students are given flexibility that the traditional schools cannot provide. Motivation and engagement for this group of students remains a continuous challenge, and we continue to identify numerous students who have fallen even farther behind and additionally are dealing with many social and emotional issues. Without alternatives such as our school, 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.

Several years ago, DOPR E-schools were tied to a funding model that moved from a system of funding based on enrollment of students to a participation-based model. I maintain that funding this population of at-risk students based on student engagement in learning opportunities (hours), does not support the

cost of educating some of the most vulnerable students in our communities. Additionally, these schools **do not** receive any support from Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid (DPIA) even though their population includes a high percentage of identified disadvantaged youth.

Through a provision provided in Substitute House Bill 123 (133rd General Assembly) in December 2020, legislators acknowledged the need for a hybrid-funding model for the DOPR E-schools. A pilot program was established to change how DOPR E-school students in grades eight through twelve would be funded for FY'21 thru FY'23. Findlay Digital Academy, along with five other DOPR E-schools, was eligible to participate in this pilot in which additional funding was based on a multiple-tiered model. The pilot was successful!

With this model, calculations for funding took into account not only “engagement in learning opportunities” by students, but also included 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 was capped at the previous formula amount of just over \$6,000 per student. Please note that in the current report submitted by the Ohio Department of Education, *Funding Pilot Program for Online Dropout Prevention and Recovery Schools* (December 2022), it was reported, “In the 2021-22 school year, the average state foundation funding generated by students in a brick-and-mortar community school was \$10,711.69 per full time equivalent. Using the amount of state funding generated by the six DOPR E-schools and counting students without adjustments for documented learning opportunities yields \$6,077.21 per pupil.”¹ The three-part funding structure that was piloted has provided funding on a multiple-tiered level system that is MUCH more meaningful and **accountable** versus a system that only funds for hours. To be clear, this method **does NOT provide any additional dollars**; this method only allows a student to generate the maximum full-time equivalency portion of the school year for which the student is enrolled in the school.

The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) and six participating E-schools worked cooperatively to gather this data that studied the effects of the alternative funding model. I am hopeful that you are familiar with the *Funding Pilot Program for Online Dropout Prevention and Recovery Schools* report published by the Office of Budget and School Funding in December 2022. I would like to thank the members of the ODE including Aaron Rausch, Elena Sanders, James Lansden, and others who spent a great deal of time working with us to highlight the importance of these schools and implementing the pilot to provide a more reasonable funding process.

This final report was submitted to Governor Mike DeWine and the General Assembly and provided a clear picture of DOPR schools and the pilot program. One example is included on page 5 where data that details Full Time Equivalency (FTE) is highlighted. Without the pilot, during FY'22, FDA would have only received 77.5% of the maximum FTE through “documented learning opportunities” or hours. However, because of the additional tiers available – attendance and course completions – FDA was able to recapture the remainder of the funds to generate 100% funding for each student in relation to the period of enrollment. I cannot stress strongly enough that for several years prior to the pilot we were NOT able to generate full funding for our students which ultimately caused deficit spending. As stated in the report, “Relying on a combination of enrollment, engagement, and courses completed/credits earned allows schools to maximize funding for these at-risk students.”²

In HB 33, the Governor recognizes the importance of the DOPR pilot and recommends the extension of the pilot thru FY'25. I truly appreciate this support; however, the *Funding Pilot Program for Online Dropout Prevention and Recovery Schools* report was not published until after ODE had submitted its

¹ *Funding Pilot Program for Online Dropout Prevention and Recovery Schools*, December 2022, page 3

² *Funding Pilot Program for Online Dropout Prevention and Recovery Schools*, December 2022, page 6

budget proposal to the Office of Budget and Management for review. That report showcases how successful this program is, and **I would advocate to you that this method of funding should now be made permanent for all DOPR E-schools.** Through the Funding Pilot Program report, it has been shown that:

- these schools serve a vulnerable population,
- that there are safeguards in place to limit the funding to the maximum full-time equivalency of the enrollment period,
- that credits earned support graduation,
- that these pilot payments are not supplemental,
- that there is an inverse relationship between an E-school's foundation payment and the pilot payment. As one increases, the other decreases. This payment allows schools to fill in the funding gap when documented learning opportunities decrease,
- and lastly, that the cost is relatively low.

I know you have your work cut out for you in implementing the Cupp-Patterson school funding plan. The good news is these DOPR funds have already been in existence for several years and they were already budgeted for in HB 33. Thus, I am not asking for any new funding! **But I do ask you to make the hybrid funding model for DOPR E-schools permanent, because these schools cannot be expected to maintain the quality of their programming without fair funding.** Without the funding options provided through this pilot, FDA would be forced to significantly reduce operations. This would directly impact our students who understand that our DOPR schools are one of the last opportunities to engage in learning and earn a high school diploma. I am not asking for support for more, I'm just asking for equity.

On behalf of Findlay Digital Academy students, parents, board and staff, I thank you for your time and support, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.