

February 20, 2023

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Senate Education Committee

I write in opposition to Senate Bill 1. For brevity, I focus on two issues of this broad-ranging legislation: the shift of functions from the elected State Board of Education to a 'Department of Education and Workforce,' and the vocationalization of the school system implicit in that move. Senator Reineke explains in his Feb. 14th testimony that he sponsor SB1 because the current system is failing, as indicated by a 19.3% college remediation rate and mixed results in the National Assessment of Educational Progress.¹ In an email last December regarding the forerunner of SB1 (SB 178) he argued that shifting control of key areas from the State Board would not reduce public input because "public input will be prioritized through your elected officials here in the legislature and, most importantly, by our families who have a critical role in educating our children."

None of these reasons are logically connected to the proposed legislation. There is no reason to think that centralizing control or emphasizing work preparation will reduce remediation rates or raise NAEP scores. Remediation rates have actually fallen in the state since the early teens² and a meaningful response would be to provide equitable and sufficient K-12 funding -- remediation rates usually track district income levels -- and for universities to switch from remedial to 'co-requisite' education models for working with under-prepared students.³

The suggestions that current problems are a function of a lack of "accountability" and that the proposed structure will somehow increase accountability -- another reason Senator Reineke gives for proposing SB1 -- are implausible. The state system has been under heavy 'accountability' pressures for at least two decades since President Bush's "No Child Left Behind" legislation. There is no reason to think that underfunding schools, monitoring them more closely, and punishing them when they don't reach arbitrary standards, will produce a better educated workforce or a more thoughtful and engaged citizenry.

The suggestion that legislators, who must deal with a huge range of issues, will be more responsive to the public on school issues than an elected state school board is also problematic. I have concerns about the current SBOE, but a better response would be to improve the democratic scope of its operation, for example, by using digital technologies to better advertise and alert constituents of meetings and issues, using online message boards or software to enable the public to annotate or comment on proposed regulations or rules, livestreaming meetings in ways that allow the public to participate by asking questions (e.g., in chatboxes), and so on.⁴

¹ See <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/overview/OH?>

²Kelly, J. (2020, 8 January). Fewer kids need college remedial classes, but some professors question data. *Dayton Daily News*. <https://www.daytondailynews.com/news/local-education/fewer-kids-need-college-remedial-classes-some-question-the-data/HZ8fFsdoxpW7ldHVxdLAZO/>

³ Ran, Y. and Lin, F. (2022). Rethinking remedial programs to promote college student success. *Brookings Institute*. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2022/02/15/rethinking-remedial-programs-to-promote-college-student-success/> and Elsen-Rooney, M. (2023). CUNY phases out its last 'remedial' course, capping yearslong shift. *Chalkbeat*. <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2023/1/11/23548537/cuny-community-college-remedial-classes-shift-corequisites-open-admissions>

⁴ These and other ideas are discussed in Young, M. D., VanGronigen, B. A., Rodriguez, K., Tmimi, S., & McCrory, A. (2021). Do State Boards of Education Offer an Avenue for Public Voice? *Urban Education*, 56(4), 552–580. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920953887>

The creation of a "Department of Education and Workforce (DEW)" with control over academic standards, model curricula, and assessment and reporting structures (among other things) is even more problematic.

Career and technical education programs *could* be pursued on a European model, as a collaboration between schools, industry, and strong unions. They *could* be structured to incorporate a strong curriculum grounded in the social sciences, humanities, and arts as well as technical areas. They *could* be devised to help students analyze the political and economic processes reshaping occupational structures and work systems. These would be essential parts of the curriculum if we wanted to prepare students for the coming era of radical disruption in economic systems, occupational structures, production technologies, worker rights, and global logistics. As one vocational education theorist put it, besides teaching things like computer skills, we need to "educate young workers so that they have multiple skills and bodies of knowledge to draw on, so that they are able to analyze and act upon opportunities to affect the direction of their employment, and so that they can strive to create meaning in their working lives."⁵

But instead of that, SB1 focuses instead on narrow job preparation, tied to analyses of current "in-demand jobs" to be defined by as-yet unknown methods and surveys of employers (R.C. 6301.11, 6301.111, and 6301.112.) It mandates that students be oriented towards these areas as early as 7th grade.(R.C. 3313.6020(D)(3). Aside from the problems that job opportunities may have changed by the time 7th graders graduate from high school, tying schooling to particular in-demand occupations rather than providing students with a broader and more adaptable education is a recipe for an ignorant, low-wage work force. Look at the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates of occupational job growth nationally.⁶ The five occupations expected to add the most jobs are:

Home Health and Personal Care Aides (924,000)	(\$29,000)
Restaurant Cooks (460,000)	(\$30,000)
Software Developers (371,000)	(\$127,630)
Fast Food and Counter Workers (243,000)	(\$25,000)
General and Operations Manager (210,000)	(\$98,000)

Three of these, accounting for the vast majority of new jobs, on average pay less than the living wage for a single person in Franklin County.⁷ The particular occupational profile in Ohio may be different, but it is implausible to think it's much brighter. Would the goal in such a scenario be to route students into these low-paying but 'high demand' jobs? Would it be to train everyone to be a software engineer – which will not increase the number of jobs in that area. Or will this emphasis simply give large employers disproportionate influence over the school system?

We *do* need to help students acquire skills that prepare them for work, but more importantly we need to provide them with the analytic skills to understand how occupations have become precarious and underpaid, the math skills to understand the economic system shaping their life chances, the artistic and literary skills that could help them imagine alternative ways of living and working, and the language and communicative skills to effectively articulate their perspectives and organize with others to change the existing system. SB1 does nothing to promote these needed skills and indeed pushes the school system in the opposite direction. The Department of Education does need to change, but the kind of vocationalization proposed it is precisely the wrong way to go.

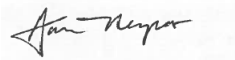
⁵ Rose, M. (2017). Rereading "Vocational Education and the New World of Work." National Education Policy Center. <https://nepc.colorado.edu/blog/rereading-vocational>

⁶ <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/most-new-jobs.htm>

⁷ MIT Living Wage Calculator - <https://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/39049>

Chairman, thank you for your time. I welcome any questions from the committee.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jan Nesor", is placed on a light gray rectangular background.

Jan Nesor

[for identification purposes only:

Professor, Dept. of Educational Studies, The Ohio State University]