



TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE ON FY24-25 BIENNIAL BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE OHIO DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Senate Education Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today on Ohio's preK-12 education system and the budget recommendations for the Ohio Department of Education. My name is Dr. Stephanie Siddens, and I am the Interim Superintendent of Public Instruction.

As you know, the significant challenges of these past several school years affected the way students learn and the way educators teach. Although our students and schools are starting to regain a sense of normalcy, the data show that students are still recovering from the effects of the pandemic.

Yet, I see an incredible amount of hope and excitement for the future of education in Ohio. I see students who are actively engaged in their education, teachers who go the extra mile to provide the best opportunities for their students, and administrators who are eager to tackle problems head on.

Through the leadership of Governor DeWine and Lt. Governor Husted, together with the support of the General Assembly and State Board of Education, the Department of Education is committed to moving Ohio students FORWARD. *Future Forward Ohio* reflects the Department's strategic priorities to help students recover from the pandemic.

Three of those priorities are literacy, learning acceleration, and workforce readiness. The DeWine-Husted budget recognizes these priorities and dedicates significant resources to important initiatives that will improve outcomes for all of Ohio's students, regardless of where they live or what type of school they attend. I will discuss each of these priorities and take questions before I ask Aaron Rausch, the Department's Chief of Budget and School Funding, to speak about the school funding formula, school choice provisions, and other areas of funding contained within the budget.

Literacy

Reading is fundamental; it serves as the basis for all learning. A child's ability to read early on affects their access to, and interest in, content at all grade levels and enhances all aspects of their lives.

Sadly, too many children are not reading at grade level. As a state, we have to do better.

Forty percent of all Ohio's third graders are not reading at grade level – 40% percent. The third-grade data for our most vulnerable populations is even more concerning – 55% of economically disadvantaged students and English learners, 64% of black students, and 71% of students with disabilities are not proficient in reading. This is a wakeup call for ALL of us.

Research shows that students who master strong reading skills by the third grade are less likely to fall behind; are more likely to graduate; and are less likely to drop out of school. Most research studies on effective literacy instruction are conducted with students who are at risk for reading failure, including our most vulnerable populations. As we see from that research, structured literacy approaches are especially effective with struggling readers, students with reading disabilities, students with language-



based disabilities, and students for whom English is not their first language. But even students without reading difficulties need this approach to help advance their word recognition and comprehension skills. As Governor DeWine said, “The jury is in.” We know what works to teach students to read. We cannot wait any longer to do better in supporting students to master this critical skill. Now is the time to ensure ALL of Ohio’s children are receiving high-quality, evidence-based literacy instruction aligned to the science of reading.

The science of reading refers to instruction that is explicit and systematic and addresses phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and writing. This means we must explicitly teach the sounds and symbols of our language and teach skills for language comprehension in order to create proficient readers. Children must continue to be supported in these skill areas as they progress to higher grades and more complex text and vocabulary. Only when children are mastering all of these skills are they proficient readers. And only when we graduate proficient readers are they ready to be contributing members of the workforce.

National research, the experiences of other states, and programs we have implemented in Ohio all tell us that the science of reading works. It is the best way to improve literacy rates for all students. Now is the time to take all that we have learned and put it into action for the good of our students.

As a state, improving literacy is a moral imperative. This requires a comprehensive approach to teaching students to read. The DeWine-Husted budget funds each piece of the puzzle. Let me describe each piece.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Laying the foundation for successful reading begins before students enter kindergarten. The strategies to raise literacy proficiency must include increased access to high-quality preschool. We know low-income children who participate in high-quality early childhood education outperform their peers in both kindergarten readiness and third grade reading proficiency. Today, Ohio serves approximately two-thirds of low-income 3- and 4-year-olds across four publicly funded programs: early childhood education, preschool special education, publicly funded child care, and federal head start preschool.

The DeWine-Husted budget will allow early childhood education providers to serve an additional 11,525 students each year, bringing the total number of low-income children who can access the program to nearly 29,400 and reducing the number of unserved low-income children by 25%. I was pleased to see the House added an additional \$15 million in funding to support early childhood education. These funds will serve 3,750 more low-income children each year and move the state closer to ensuring all low-income students have access to quality early learning.

EDUCATOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Within the school setting, an effective teacher is the most important contributor to student success. Teachers trained in the science of reading are KEY to our goal to raise literacy proficiency. It is critical that every educator, across all content areas and grade levels, understands language and literacy development. The Department is already leveraging federal COVID relief funding to develop professional development in effective literacy instruction and make it available to every educator across the state.

The DeWine-Husted budget provides \$86 million over the biennium for all educators to complete professional development in the science of reading. This would support \$1,200 stipends for K-5 teachers, English language arts teachers in grades 6-12, intervention specialists, and instructional coaches and \$400 stipends for middle and high school teachers in other subject areas. These



amounts assume some educators (10%) have already received the required training. The House version of the budget reduces the funding for professional development by half to \$43 million over the biennium.

The Department anticipates the training for K-5 teachers and English language arts teachers to be about 30-35 hours in length, with a combination of virtual and in-person sessions. Teachers in grades K-3 and special education teachers in all grades already must complete 18 hours of professional development on the instruction of students with dyslexia under current law. Teachers who have completed the dyslexia training will be able to count those hours toward the 30-35 hours of general professional development in the science of reading, and the Department will direct them to specific modules covering other reading topics to ensure they have a well-rounded understanding of effective literacy instruction.

For middle and high school teachers who are not teaching English language arts, the professional development would be approximately 10-12 hours, with an option to take additional hours at the discretion of the individual teacher or school. As teachers in these grade bands are teaching content areas like math, science, or social studies, the goal is to build their knowledge and skills to support grade-level and subject-specific vocabulary and comprehension.

The Department understands that teachers' time is valuable. It is important that teachers not be away from their classrooms for extended periods of time to complete professional development in the science of reading. The purpose of the stipends is to compensate teachers for extra time outside of the classroom needed to do the training. The budget also directs the Department to work with the Department of Higher Education, educator preparation programs, and local professional development committees to assist teachers who complete the training to apply it toward college credit or licensure renewal requirements.

TEACHER PREPARATION

While educators currently in classrooms across the state will benefit from this training, future teachers also must develop a deep understanding of effective literacy instruction. The Department is committed to our partnership with the Department of Higher Education and working with our educator preparation programs to embed science of reading strategies and teaching methods in required literacy coursework for students training to become teachers. These conversations are ongoing, and some programs have already made changes to move toward the science of reading. The House version of the budget requires all educator preparation programs to align their coursework with evidence-based strategies for effective literacy instruction aligned to the science of reading and for the Chancellor of Higher Education to audit the programs to verify alignment. By providing training for teachers who are already in the field and for our teacher candidates, we can guarantee that all teachers have the skills to help students become strong readers.

HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

Excellent teachers are a major factor in student achievement, but instructional materials and curriculum also matter. When it comes to moving the needle for kids, it's not just *who's* teaching, but also *what* they're teaching *with*, that matters. In all subjects, high-quality instructional materials that align with strong academic standards produce better learning outcomes for students. In reading that means a core curriculum and instructional materials aligned to the science of reading for all students and intervention programs for students who struggle to read.

To give all students access to effective literacy instruction while still retaining local control, the budget directs the Department to solicit a list of approved, high-quality instructional materials. To approve



materials, the Department will develop a rubric to assess the quality of curricula submitted for consideration. From the approved list, schools will select the curricula and materials that best fit their needs. We anticipate that the approved list will provide substantial choice for schools. States such as Arkansas and Colorado have approved lists of literacy curricula that include up to 20 options.

The DeWine-Husted budget makes a one-time GRF investment of \$64 million to subsidize schools' purchases of approved high-quality core curricula and instructional materials in reading, while the House budget allocates \$44 million. The \$64 million in the executive budget assumes an average of \$75,000 per school district to purchase materials. This amount also assumes some schools have already adopted high-quality instructional materials (10% of schools and districts). We know many schools have leveraged federal grants, COVID relief funds, and local sources of funds to support student learning with high-quality instructional materials. I commend these efforts and will continue encouraging schools to act now. Schools that have not already adopted high-quality instructional materials aligned to the science of reading will receive priority in state funding.

STRUCTURED LITERACY

At the same time the state is investing significant resources in professional development and high-quality instructional materials, we also must stop using instructional practices that are counterproductive to student learning. The budget prohibits an approach to reading instruction known as “three cueing,” or meaning, structure, and visual (MSV) cues, and instead promotes instructional strategies grounded in explicit and systematic teaching or a structured literacy approach.

Let me give you an example.

A first grader is reading a story and comes to the word “pony” and is not familiar with this word. Under a three-cueing approach, the teacher would prompt the student to look at the picture, look at the beginning sound and think of words they know that begin with p or skip the word, read the rest, and then come back to see if they can figure it out.

Using these teaching cues, a student might look at the picture and say “horse” and not “pony” and then read on. If they are looking at the first letter, then they may say “puppy” instead of “pony” and then read on. Or the student may skip the word and come back and use the meaning of the other words to try to figure out the word. At no point is the student directed to decode the whole word, sound by sound, using their knowledge of letters and sounds. Inserting the word “horse” for “pony” may get at the meaning, however, for comprehension there is a difference between a horse and a pony.

Under a structured literacy approach, when the student comes to the word “pony” and they do not recognize it, then the teacher would point to the word and ask the student to look at all the letters and think about the sounds each makes. In this case the teacher would point to the first letter and ask the student to say its sound. The student would say /p/. Then the teacher points to the next letter and asks the student to say the sound. If the student says /aw/, the teacher tells the student to try the other sound of the letter o /o/. Instruction continues in this way until the student says all the sounds and blends them together to read the word “pony.” After the student correctly reads the word “pony,” the teacher asks if the student knows what a pony is and talks about the difference between a pony and horse.

The goal is to ensure all students have the skills to decode unknown words now and to use those skills as they move to higher grades and are expected to read longer and more complicated words.



LITERACY COACHES

Ongoing coaching and support are essential components of professional development in literacy. While we have leveraged federal funds and limited state resources to support regional literacy coaches across the state, we must do more. The DeWine-Husted budget will support 100 additional literacy coaches in schools and districts by the end of the biennium, focusing on schools with the lowest reading proficiency rates. While the Department would like all districts to have a literacy coach, we have chosen to focus on the approximately 100 districts that are required to develop reading achievement plans. Those districts receive fewer than three stars for the Early Literacy component on the report card and 51% or fewer of their third-graders score proficient or higher on the English language arts test. We also do not want to deprive students of good reading teachers by taking the teachers out of the classroom to become literacy coaches.

The new literacy coaches will not be employed by the Department, but they will be under the direction of the Department so they can provide consistent instructional support to educators in the schools they serve. The Department's Unit of Literacy Achievement and Reading Success will oversee the deployment of the coaches and monitor their effectiveness. Literacy coaches will provide two types of coaching. They will provide instructional coaching to support teachers working directly with students. Coaches will assist with instructional strategies to build proficiency in the components of reading and writing for all students and will identify targeted interventions for students who need more help.

Literacy coaches also will provide systems-level coaching for building and district leaders. This type of coaching is critical for creating a strong culture of reading achievement and commitment to evidence-based instructional practices. District and school leaders play key roles in supporting the science of reading by selecting instructional materials, reviewing data to make informed instructional decisions, and designing schedules to allow time for literacy-focused activities.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

All of these components are vital pieces of the puzzle. Schools that have implemented these pieces are showing positive results.

In 2016, Riverside Elementary in Logan County transformed its literacy instruction by aligning it to the science of reading. Riverside Elementary is located in a district in which 43% of children live in poverty and 11% of students are identified as students with disabilities. After adopting a systematic and comprehensive approach to literacy instruction, Riverside saw significant improvement in its third-grade English language arts proficiency rates, increasing from 50% in 2016 to 91% in 2019 and outperforming the state average by 25 percentage points. Staff attribute the turnaround to professional development in the science of reading, adoption of evidence-based instructional materials, and collaboration among teachers who share a common mindset centered on literacy achievement.

We know investing in the science of reading – through early childhood education, professional development, high-quality instructional materials, and coaching support – is the path to creating strong readers. As a state, we cannot accept that 40% of our third-graders are not reading at grade level. A piecemeal or fragmented approach to literacy improvement will not produce the results we want for Ohio's students. We encourage the Senate to restore the funding levels for literacy proposed in the DeWine-Husted budget.



Learning Acceleration

Over the past two years, Ohio students have benefited from targeted supports to re-engage in their education after the pandemic and accelerate learning. This includes the Statewide Mathematics and Literacy Tutoring Grant Program, a partnership between K-12 schools and higher education to provide critical high-dosage tutoring to students all across Ohio. National research shows that high-dosage tutoring can lead to between 3 and 15 months of learning gains, especially for low-income students. This model is currently being implemented in 33 colleges and universities in Ohio to enhance classroom instruction with personalized literacy and math support in small groups or one-on-one catered to individual student needs. But these programs also provide so much more than just academic support by connecting our students with college-age mentors. Positive mentor relationships increase feelings of well-being, increase school attendance, and ultimately lead to greater civic engagement later in life. College students – many of whom are enrolled in teacher preparation programs – gain experience working with children as they prepare for a career in the classroom.

The budget continues support for this impactful work with \$15 million in FY25. Along with the Tutor Ohio Kids partnership with educational service centers, which provides qualified tutors in core subject areas at schools that elect to participate in the program, continued state funding ensures students and families across Ohio have access to these programs.

To track the progress students are making in recovering academically, the Department published a new dashboard on its website. The Student Recovery Dashboard displays publicly available data in a format that enables users to easily understand student performance trends before the pandemic and beyond. It captures key indicators such as enrollment, graduation, K-3 on-track diagnostic trends, chronic absenteeism, and proficiency scores at both the statewide level and the district level. A similar dashboard for community schools is in development.

Workforce Readiness

Our goal is for all students to find their passions – to find the things they love to do and can use to build happy, healthy and productive lives right here in Ohio. As we continue to attract new business and industry to the state, a highly trained workforce is critical to long-term economic growth. More than half of Ohio's in-demand occupations require a certificate or degree. We must do more to support career awareness at all ages, provide opportunities for work-based learning and credential attainment, and ensure students have access to the skills and training to enter the workforce and pursue their passions.

EXPANDING ACCESS TO CAREER-TECHNICAL EDUCATION

As the Governor noted in his State of the State, career-technical education programs often have wait lists and, in other cases, schools, districts, and career centers do not have the most current equipment and technology to prepare students for today's rapidly changing world. The DeWine-Husted budget recommends a one-time infusion of \$300 million to support facility and equipment needs for career-technical education through grants administered by the Ohio Facilities Construction Commission and Department of Education, in consultation with the Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation. This funding will expand access to career-technical education programs across the state, and these funds are retained in the House-passed version of the budget.

The \$100 million allocated in the Department of Education budget will help traditional school districts, community schools, STEM schools, and career centers purchase new equipment for in-demand career-technical education and credentialing programs based on regional workforce needs. Programs



like advanced manufacturing, welding, robotics, and other in-demand programs may cost as much as \$500,000 to launch. This funding allows for strategic investment in schools across the state, prioritizing programs that support Ohio's Top Jobs List and credentialing programs in sectors that need workers.

The budget also allows schools to leverage programming at Ohio Technical Centers to address waitlists for popular programs and fill in gaps where a high school or career center may not offer programs. Allowing schools to contract with an Ohio Technical Center to provide career-technical education to high school students immediately addresses capacity challenges for in-demand programming.

PROMOTING CAREER AWARENESS AND EXPLORATION

Each student should see the relevance of their learning, be exposed to practical, real-world work settings, and begin to define their future. Career awareness and exploration begins in kindergarten with awareness of different careers, progresses to exploration of career interests in middle school, and culminates in career planning in high school. The executive and House budgets continue the phase-in of Career Awareness and Exploration funds in each year of the biennium, providing career-technical planning districts with \$7.50 per pupil in FY24 and \$10 per pupil in FY25 to invest in these efforts.

Career awareness and exploration funds can support a wide range of career-focused activities for students. Districts around the state have used these funds to develop grade-appropriate lessons on different careers, establish job shadowing opportunities with businesses, bring in speakers to talk about their careers, practice interviewing skills, support microcredentialing programs for middle school students, and hire career coaches.

BUSINESS ADVISORY COUNCILS

Career awareness and exploration should be closely tied to regional business needs to help students see the great opportunities that exist right in their own communities. Business Advisory Councils convene education and business leaders to engage in dialogue, establish partnerships, and identify strategies that transform the student learning experience. The Department annually gives the Business-Education Leader Awards for Excellent Business Advisory Councils to recognize two-, three- and four-star rated Business Advisory Councils throughout the state. These awards honor Business Advisory Councils that are doing exceptional work to build strong partnerships with the business community, strengthen students' professional skills, and coordinate work-based learning experiences.

This budget provides a financial incentive of up to \$50,000 each year to Business Advisory Councils that receive three- or four-star ratings under the Department's evaluation rubric. These funds must be used to increase career awareness and exploration activities for students and expand access to work-based learning opportunities. For the 2022-2023 school year, there are 19 highly rated councils. Applications for the Business-Education Leader Awards have increased each year since the program's inception, and we anticipate the budget's financial incentive will encourage more Business Advisory Councils to implement quality practices.

INDUSTRY-RECOGNIZED CREDENTIALS AND REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCES

Before students even leave high school, they are earning credentials and gaining work-based learning experiences so that by the time they graduate, they are ready to enter the workforce. We know that more employers are looking to hire individuals who have credentials. Ohio's Innovative Workforce Incentive Program provides a \$1,250 incentive for schools and districts that help students



earn industry-recognized credentials in priority industry sectors. Last year, students earned more than 5,700 credentials through the Innovative Workforce Incentive Program, and the graduating class of 2021 earned more than 23,500 industry-recognized credentials.

Work-based learning experiences are a proven strategy across all industry areas for on-the-job exposure and career development. Similar to the incentive for priority credentials, the DeWine-Husted budget recommends incentive payments of \$1,000 to schools for each student who completes at least 250 hours of work-based learning. The House-passed version of the budget retains the funds for these programs. The Department will continue to provide support to schools and districts in creating valuable work-based learning experiences through workshops, regional meetings, and technical assistance.

COLLEGE CREDIT PLUS

A decade ago, Ohio high school students had limited, inconsistent, and fragmented opportunities to earn college credit while in high school. Today, Ohio's College Credit Plus Program helps students in grades 7-12 earn college and high school credits at the same time by taking college courses from community colleges or universities at no cost to the students or their families. Sometimes these courses are offered right at the student's high school, taught by high school teachers who are credentialed to teach college-level courses. In partnership with Chancellor Gardner, I am happy that the House-passed version of the budget retains \$15 million over the biennium to support additional teacher credentialing grants. In distributing these grants, our agencies intend to prioritize regions where there are few opportunities to access College Credit Plus coursework at the high school.

OHIO MILITARY VETERAN EDUCATOR PROGRAM

Just as this budget will support existing and aspiring educators, we must do more to encourage more Ohioans to enter the teaching profession. Our military veterans and their families, instilled with a sense of duty and purpose, already have chosen public service. The DeWine-Husted budget expands the Ohio Military Veteran Educator Program to support veterans (and their spouses) to enter the teaching profession or work in Ohio's public schools. In partnership with General Ashenurst and the Department of Veterans Services, the program will support enrollment of veterans in educator preparation programs, cover the cost for veterans to obtain an alternative military educator license, fund efforts to recruit veterans in both teaching and non-teaching roles, and provide financial incentives to public schools that hire veterans. The executive budget also creates the Governor's Ohio Military Veteran Educators Fellowship Pilot to recruit and place veterans in low-performing public schools. I'm excited that the House version of the budget retains these programs.

Conclusion

I applaud the Governor and Lt. Governor for continuing to prioritize children, families, and educators. This budget supports all of our students through expanded high-quality early childhood education, ensures every student receives effective, evidence-based literacy instruction, fosters career exploration, and allows each student to live up to their true potential.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to present to you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.