

Senate Finance Committee

Testimony of Marie Hanna, Superintendent of Ohio Connections Academy

May 31, 2023

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the Senate Finance Committee thank you for allowing me to testify today.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on K-12 funding. My name is Marie Hanna and I am the Superintendent of Ohio Connections Academy. Ohio Connections Academy is a public virtual charter school that serves K-12 students in every county in the state of Ohio. The school has been in operation since 2003. We will be celebrating our 20th anniversary this fall.

I started with Ohio Connections Academy as an assistant principal in 2005 and have been the Superintendent for 12 years. I have been an educator in a variety of settings for 30 years.

Ohio Connections Academy serves students from across the state of Ohio in grades K-12. We currently have 5100 students enrolled. We serve a diverse body of students: 43% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch and 13.9% have an IEP. We work hard to meet our students where they are academically. We have a dedicated team of educators and staff who work diligently every day to educate and help the students at Ohio Connections Academy.

I am here today to speak to you about two topics, the disparity in Disadvantage Pupil Impact Aid (DPIA) and the need for flexibility in the calculation of graduation rates.

Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid is an important funding tool to further help those students who are in need. Public e-Schools students are the only category of pupils that do not receive Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid in Ohio. The aid, which is calculated based on the number and concentration of economically disadvantaged students enrolled at each public school and district, does not take into account the 35,000 students enrolled in public e-Schools in Ohio. It is important that all students who fall into this pupil category should be included in funding as they are also in need of additional educational support and services.

At Ohio Connections Academy 43% of students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. We believe that this number is higher, but many families choose not to fill out the paperwork to determine eligibility. You are all aware of the pandemic learning loss that was experienced by students in Ohio and all over the country. Our school, just like other schools around the state, are seeing more students requiring remediation in order to be on grade level with their reading and math knowledge and skills. Allowing public e-School students to be counted in DPIA is important as all public schools are facing a funding cliff with the ESSER funding coming to an end. The federal relief funds have been used to provide remediation for students in math and reading through interventionists and supplemental programming. When this funding goes away, we will still need to provide these education services to students at our school.

To further demonstrate the need for DPIA funding for our students, I would like to share some statistics with you. At Ohio Connections Academy:

- 52.7% of students in our remediation programs are eligible for free and reduced lunch.
- 62% of students on a reading improvement plan are eligible for free and reduced lunch.
- The graduation rate for our free and reduced lunch students was 12 % lower than the overall graduation rate.

The numbers I just shared with you demonstrate that students enrolled in public virtual schools deserve DPIA funding. They are just as deserving of this funding and should not be punished because they have chosen to receive their education through a full-time public virtual school. This funding would allow us to continue the additional remediation and interventions that are in place due to ESSER and ARP funds. Specifically, Ohio Connections Academy would be able to use these DPIA funds to provide critical support like tutors, supplemental programs, and interventionists to support students in improving their math and reading skills. This funding would also pay for staffing to support our college and career readiness programming for high school students who are pursuing alternative demonstrations of competency for graduation, such as pre-apprenticeship programs, expanded opportunities for industry credentials, work-based learning, WorkKeys and increased supports for students to earn the OhioMeansJobs Readiness Seal.

I would also like to bring to your attention the need to modify graduation rate measures for students enrolled in public e-schools. It is important that all schools including e-schools are accountable for their results. We are interested in accountability that considers our demographics and mobility rate. The current method of calculating graduation rates in Ohio does not consider students who are highly mobile, students who withdraw after a short period of enrollment at our schools and does not reflect the mandatory withdrawal of students after 72 hours due to an unexcused failure to participate in learning. These regulations are unique to virtual schools in Ohio.

As it currently stands, it is very difficult for a virtual school to receive a multiple star rating on the 4 year cohort graduation rate. The mobility of students at e-schools is much higher than at a traditional school, last year 45% of students at Ohio Connections Academy were new to the school. Many of these students will come into the school credit deficient and we work hard to place students appropriately and catch them up in their coursework. Despite all our efforts to catch a student up they may still be short on credits to graduate, which results in a penalty for e-schools and does not adequately reflect the work that has been done to catch students up academically.

We also have students who enroll in our school and stay for a limited amount of time. Once they disenroll at our school there is no mechanism to ensure that they enroll at the school they came from or the school district in which they reside. Another issue is that virtual schools are required to withdraw students after 72 hours if there is an unexcused failure of the student to participate in learning. Under state law the school from which the students came are required

to re-enroll those students, but that does not always happen. All of these factors contribute to lower graduation rates for virtual schools.

It is my understanding that there is an effort to change the method of calculating graduation rates which would consider credit deficient students as well as those who are mandatorily disenrolled after 72 hours. Including a modified graduation rate would go a long way to show graduation rates more accurately at virtual schools.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today on Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid and graduation rates. I am happy to answer any questions that Chair and Committee Members may have.