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Testimony  
House Education Committee  
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Provided by:  
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Chair Fowler Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Robinson, and Distinguished Members of the House Education Committee. My name is Ben Cech, and I serve as the Government Relations Specialist of the Management Council of the Ohio Education Computer Network (OECN). I appreciate the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Management Council and Ohio's Information Technology Centers (ITCs), which collectively form the OECN. My purpose appearing before you today is to express our appreciation for the support that the General Assembly provides the OECN, and to assure you that we will continue to provide outstanding, efficient services while not seeking any funding increases in the coming biennium. We recognize that this is going to be a difficult budget to balance, and we intend to be part of the solution.

Forty-seven years ago, the Ohio General Assembly established the OECN to create a shared services model that provides K-12 school districts with cost-effective access to essential IT functions. ITCs are owned and funded by the schools they serve, with additional financial support from the General Assembly through targeted funding managed by the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (DEW). Over the years, the OECN has continued to deliver essential products and solutions to meet the evolving needs of Ohio's K-12 schools. During this time, these state subsidies have declined, now covering just 4% of ITC operating costs, down from 50% in the 1980s. Yet as I noted earlier, we do not seek any funding increase in the coming biennium.

Through both its shared services model and the optimization of various technologies, the OECN has significantly reduced costs for school districts by providing economies of scale in areas such as network infrastructure, data analytics, security, artificial intelligence, and software solutions. This model allows schools to reinvest savings into classrooms, teachers, and students, ensuring that taxpayer dollars are maximized for educational outcomes. Ohio school districts typically spend a fraction of a single percent of their per student funding on the IT services provided by their ITC.

Under Ohio Revised Code, ITCs are required to provide five core services to schools: fiscal operations (including payroll, accounting, and HR), student data management, EMIS (data transfer), INFOhio (K-12 digital library), and broadband (internet services). These essential services enable schools to efficiently and securely manage critical information, while also supplying the data that informs the General Assembly's school funding decisions. However, these core functions represent just a portion of the wide-ranging support ITCs provide to Ohio's K-12 districts.

OECN's collaborative efforts extend beyond school districts, fostering strong partnerships with state agencies such as DEW, the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS), the Department of Children and Youth (DCY), the Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE), Board of Elections through the Office of the Secretary of State, and the office of the Auditor of State. These collaborations facilitate streamlined data sharing, improved resource allocation, secure networks, greater FAFSA participation, increased opportunities, and enhanced decision-making that benefit Ohio students and residents, regardless of where they live or learn.

In conclusion, OECN's long-standing commitment to shared services, collaboration, and data-driven student success makes it an essential partner in advancing Ohio's education system. We respectfully urge the House to maintain the flat funding levels supporting the OECN in the Executive Budget.

Chair Fowler Arthur and members of the committee, thank you for your time and consideration.

