

From the Desk of the Rev. Dr. Ben Huelskamp

Chair Fowler-Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Brennan, and members of the House Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 500. My name is the Rev. Dr. Ben Huelskamp. I'm a pastor, educator, and community leader based in Central Ohio. Today I'm testifying as a private citizen and Ohioan, not in my role with any of the organizations that employ me or with which I am affiliated.

I write to express qualified support for House Bill 500, which would allow school districts to designate Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) programs as career-technical education programs. While I recognize the potential benefits of this legislation, I also wish to raise concerns that I believe warrant the committee's careful consideration.

Support for JROTC Programs

Although I did not have the opportunity to participate in JROTC as a high school student, my work as an educator has provided me with significant exposure to these programs and their participants. I have witnessed firsthand the profoundly positive impact JROTC can have on young people. The program excels in building student confidence and developing practical leadership skills that serve participants well regardless of their ultimate career paths.

JROTC provides structure, mentorship, and clear expectations at a developmental stage when many adolescents benefit greatly from such frameworks. Students who might otherwise struggle to find their place in traditional academic settings often thrive in JROTC's environment of discipline, teamwork, and progressive responsibility. These are precisely the types of transformative educational experiences we should seek to support and expand.

For these reasons, I support the intent of House Bill 500 to recognize JROTC as a valuable component of career-technical education and to provide appropriate funding support for districts that offer these programs.

Concerns Regarding Equitable Outcomes

However, my support comes with reservations rooted in concerns about equity and student agency. Research and observation have documented persistent patterns in military recruitment that disproportionately impact students of color and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. While military service represents an honorable and valuable career path, we must be vigilant that our educational policies do not inadvertently contribute to funneling students toward any single option based on demographic factors rather than genuine individual interest and aptitude. My concern is not with JROTC itself or with students who freely choose military service. Rather, I worry that designating JROTC as career-technical education without appropriate safeguards may reinforce existing inequities in how career options are presented to different student populations. When JROTC becomes students' primary source of career-technical education credit, there is a risk that the program may be understood, by students, families, and educators, as principally or

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exclusively a pathway to military enlistment rather than as a comprehensive personal development program with applications across multiple career sectors.

The leadership skills, discipline, teamwork, and organizational abilities developed through JROTC are valuable in countless civilian careers as well as preparation for college. Students who participate in JROTC should understand that they are developing broadly applicable competencies, not simply preparing for a single career trajectory.

Recommendation for Amendment

Therefore, I respectfully recommend that the committee consider amending House Bill 500 to include language requiring that students receiving career-technical education credit through JROTC programs be educated on the full range of their post-secondary opportunities and how their JROTC experience and skills could be applied in various career pathways.

Such an amendment might require that JROTC programs designated as career-technical education include curriculum components or counseling services that explicitly address:

- The transferability of JROTC-developed skills to civilian careers and further education
- Multiple post-secondary pathways, including college, trade schools, civilian employment, and military service
- How leadership, discipline, and organizational skills apply across different professional sectors
- Resources for exploring career interests beyond military service

This amendment would not diminish JROTC programs or discourage students from pursuing military careers. Rather, it would ensure that students receive the comprehensive career counseling that should accompany any career-technical education program. Just as we would expect a health sciences CTE program to present students with the full range of healthcare careers rather than steering all students toward a single occupation, we should expect the same of JROTC when it receives CTE designation and funding.

CONCLUSION

House Bill 500 represents an opportunity to recognize and support valuable educational programming while also ensuring that all students, regardless of background, receive equitable access to information about their full range of opportunities. With the recommended amendment, this legislation could serve as a model for how we honor and fund specialized programs while maintaining our commitment to student agency and equitable outcomes.

I urge the committee to consider incorporating language that requires comprehensive career pathway education for students receiving CTE credit through JROTC programs. Such a provision would strengthen the bill and ensure that JROTC continues to serve as the personal development program it was designed to be, preparing students for success across the full spectrum of their potential futures.

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Respectfully submitted,

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Pastor, Community Leader, and Educator
Testifying as Private Citizen