



## Testimony Before the Senate Education Committee on FY26-27 Biennial Budget Recommendations for the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce

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Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Senate Education Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you on the executive budget recommendations for the Department of Education and Workforce. My name is Steve Dackin, and I am the Department's Director.

The Department is focused on four key policy priorities: **literacy, learning acceleration, workforce readiness, and student wellness**. These priorities keep students at the center of our decisions.

With the support of the General Assembly, Ohio has made significant investments to align literacy instruction to the Science of Reading, expand access to career-technical education, and support student well-being. The executive budget builds on that previous work and makes strategic investments to further Governor DeWine's goal of supporting students to reach their God-given potential.

### Literacy

Two years ago, Governor DeWine and the General Assembly invested \$171 million to improve literacy instruction. The Department has approved curriculum, instructional materials, and intervention programs aligned to the Science of Reading, and schools and districts are choosing materials to adopt. Tens of thousands of teachers and administrators have completed training in the Science of Reading, with all educators required to do so by the end of June. Currently, 84 literacy coaches are supporting educators in 125 schools in promoting comprehensive literacy instruction.

Statewide 64.5% of third graders were proficient in reading for the 2023-24 school year, an increase from 62.3% the previous year. While we are seeing positive trends, we cannot stop until every Ohio student has the foundational reading skills to succeed. Students who master strong reading skills by third grade are less likely to fall behind and more likely to graduate.

Governor DeWine is keeping his commitment to literacy in this budget by recommending continued support for the literacy coaches who are leading instructional change in classrooms. The executive budget also proposes that schools and districts use at least 25% of their Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid (DPIA) to implement the Science of Reading, and that

those with the lowest rates of literacy achievement use at least half of their DPIA for this purpose.

As schools move toward full implementation of the Science of Reading next school year, the state must evaluate the return on its investment. The executive budget proposes a universal diagnostic assessment for grades K-3 in reading and math. Requiring all public schools to use the same diagnostic assessment will ensure that we have the data to make apples-to-apples comparisons about student achievement and can make informed decisions about allocation of resources.

The Governor's budget also provides \$1.5 million over the biennium to develop an optional model curriculum that integrates English language arts, social studies, and civics and to deploy professional development. An integrated curriculum, especially in the early grades, addresses the challenge we heard from social studies teachers convened by the Governor – there's just not enough time in the school day to cover everything. Teaching students to read using materials that improve their understanding of civics is a solution to this problem.

## Learning Acceleration

As we maintain our focus on literacy, we cannot lose sight of math. Many students are capable of higher-level math but do not get that opportunity, often because they must opt in to more challenging courses. This budget recommends automatic math acceleration whereby students who score at the highest level on the Ohio State Test in math would be automatically enrolled in advanced learning opportunities in math the next school year, unless the student's parent opts out. Automatic math acceleration is especially beneficial for students who might otherwise not pursue more advanced math. Research shows that high-achieving black, Latino, and low-income students who take advanced math classes are more likely to graduate high school, enroll and persist in college, and take STEM courses.

We know that to make improvements in reading and math proficiency, our students deserve focused and engaging learning environments. Last year, the General Assembly passed legislation requiring schools and districts to adopt policies limiting access to cell phones. In this budget, we ask the legislature to require that schools and districts effectively ban cell phones during the instructional day. We must act so that students can realize the benefits of increased academic performance and reductions in bullying and discipline issues.

The budget also proposes implementing recommendations of the Ohio Attendance Taskforce to shift away from compliance-based methods of addressing chronic absenteeism to prevention strategies that keep students from being absent in the first place. By providing more intensive interventions for students with greater numbers of absences, schools and districts can begin to get at the root causes of absenteeism. This approach is more effective by creating a true partnership with families to support students.

We know that effective principals have a profound impact on learning and school culture. The executive budget recommends \$10 million over the biennium for a principal apprenticeship program. The two-year program will include coursework in the foundations of school leadership and on-the-job training as an apprentice under the mentorship of a high-quality principal. The goal is to develop highly skilled principals who will positively impact student learning in the schools they lead.

## Workforce Readiness

Our goal is for all students to find good jobs with sustainable wages that enable them to build happy, healthy, and productive lives right here in Ohio. But too many students leave high school without a career plan, or the mentoring and guidance needed to prepare them for life after graduation. Each student should see the relevance of his or her learning, be exposed to real-world work settings, and begin to define his or her future.

As Governor DeWine called for in his 2024 State of the State, the executive budget requires high schools to incorporate career planning into students' existing graduation plans. It is vital that schools collaborate with students and parents to develop career plans that identify each student's career goals and align the high school experience to achieve those goals.

For students to know the educational and career options available to them, we must ensure access to career-technical education before high school. The budget recommends eliminating middle-school waivers, so every seventh-grade student has access to career-technical education. When students can explore career fields in middle school, they expand their knowledge of what is possible and discover careers they did not even know existed.

To support this work, the executive budget leverages up to \$7 million each year to reimagine regionally based tech prep centers to better support schools in providing students with mentoring and career advising and expanded access to career-technical education. The executive budget also allows schools and districts to use their career awareness and exploration funds for mentoring opportunities that help students learn about careers and workforce skills, giving young people another way to acquire career knowledge while building relationships with trusted adults.

Alongside these proposals, the executive budget directs the Department, in collaboration with the Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation and the business community, to update the industry-recognized credential list used for high school graduation. The process for creating the list has not evolved in ten years. Since then, industry-recognized credentials have become a much more significant route to graduation.

Revisiting the list will ensure students earn credentials of value that prepare them for jobs in in-demand fields like information technology and cyber security, advanced manufacturing, construction, engineering, and skilled trades. The budget also maintains the Innovative

Workforce Incentive Program, providing \$32 million over the biennium to reward schools and districts that help students earn credentials of the highest value to employers.

I am especially pleased that the Governor's budget proposes \$50 million over the biennium for the Department of Public Safety to award grants to schools and educational service centers to start driver's education programs. Many students simply do not have access to driver's education, creating an obstacle to employment. I am excited to work with Director Wilson on this program.

## Student Wellness

Governor DeWine has always put the health and well-being of children first. Student Wellness and Success Funds support student mental and physical health, services for homeless or welfare-involved youth, and before- and after-school programming. The Governor's budget recommends maintaining this critical funding for schools and districts, as well as supports for school-based health centers through the Department of Health.

We know that school meals are the only meals some students can count on during the day. The budget maintains a policy from the current budget that provides state funding to cover the cost of reduced-price meals. Many schools and districts have taken advantage of a program at the federal level (Community Eligibility Provision) that allows all students to receive free meals, regardless of their income level. The executive budget requires schools to participate in the program, unless doing so creates a financial hardship. Greater access to free school meals can improve nutrition, reduce absences, and help students focus on instruction.

In 2023, the Governor tasked the School Bus Safety Working Group with making recommendations to improve school bus safety. Keeping his promise, the Governor's budget proposes full implementation of these recommendations to support the safety of Ohio's students. This includes \$30 million for a school bus safety grant program to fund safety enhancements to Ohio's school bus fleet and \$4 million for more robust driver training.

## Support for Students, Schools, and Districts

State foundation funding represents the largest part of the Department's budget, and Ohio schools rely on these funds to operate. The Governor's budget increases funding for Ohio's students, schools, and districts. It recommends the final two years of the formula phase-in, increases to the minimum state share for transportation, and updates to student enrollment and local capacity. The executive budget also begins to address guarantees by adjusting funding floors to 95% of existing levels in FY26 and 90% in FY27.

The budget continues the state's commitment to choice, maintaining eligibility for Ohio's five scholarship programs, including universal access to the EdChoice Expansion program.

Finally, quality school choice options also include community schools and STEM schools. The budget maintains the Quality Community School and Independent STEM School Support

program, increases facility funding from \$1,000 to \$1,500 per pupil, and expands the equity supplement to include our eight independent STEM schools.

## Conclusion

I applaud the Governor for continuing to prioritize students, families, and educators. The executive budget takes the next steps toward fulfilling our key policy priorities. I look forward to working closely with you and your colleagues to further explore the details of the budget recommendations for the Department of Education and Workforce.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.