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Senate Education Committee

Testimony on Sub. House Bill 96

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Cassandra Palsgrove, Director of K-12 Education Policy
Ohio Excels**

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Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on HB 96. My name is Kevin Duff, and I am the Executive Vice President of Ohio Excels. Today I am joined by my colleague, Cassandra Palsgrove, who is Ohio Excels' Director of K-12 Education Policy.

Ohio Excels is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that engages and unites Ohio's business community on the full education-to-workforce pipeline, from early childhood, K-12, higher education, and into the workforce. Several other business organizations are endorsing our testimony today, including the Ohio Business Roundtable, the Cincinnati Business Committee, the Greater Cleveland Partnership, the Columbus Partnership, the Ohio Restaurant & Hospitality Alliance, and the Ohio Council of Retail Merchants. You can find descriptions of our organizations at the end of the testimony.

Kindergarten Readiness Assessment

Business leaders understand that a prepared workforce starts with a prepared student—and that preparation begins as early as kindergarten, where tools like the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (or KRA) provide critical insight into student development.

For more than a decade, the KRA has been given to all Ohio kindergarten students in the weeks before or after the start of the school year. The KRA covers topics such as literacy and math competency, and uniquely, it is administered by the student's teacher. It was recently streamlined to make it faster and easier to administer, typically taking about 30 minutes to complete.

This benchmark helps teachers and families understand where students need additional support, tailor early interventions, and track growth. This consistent, statewide measure also allows policymakers to understand where students are when they enter kindergarten. It's because of the KRA that we know 64% of students are not fully prepared for kindergarten.

Unfortunately, the House removed the KRA from the current version of HB 96. **We are asking you to support amendment SC0157**, which will restore this valuable tool that allows teachers to assess a student's starting point when they enter kindergarten and begin to tailor instruction to meet that child's needs.

Literacy Implementation & Math Improvement

We are thrilled to see the continued commitment by the Governor and House to improving literacy in Ohio's schools by embracing and implementing the science of reading. We encourage the Senate to keep this momentum going by supporting the appropriation for literacy coaches who support educators as they implement the science of reading in schools and districts with the lowest reading proficiency rates.

While literacy efforts continue, it is time to start looking at math. Ohio student results in math are even lower than reading. Working with stakeholder groups including the Alliance for High Quality Education, Fordham, and others, we have identified two policies – **found in amendment SC0543** – that will help ensure more students have access to advanced math and that new educators are prepared to teach math.

First, we believe that schools should be required to enroll all students who score Accomplished or Advanced on the state's 7th-grade math test into Algebra I in 8th grade unless a parent chooses to opt out. Schools would still have discretion to enroll additional students in Algebra I in 8th grade using local measures and teacher judgement. More than 98% of students who scored in the top levels of the 7th grade math test (Accomplished or Advanced) scored at least proficient in math in 8th grade. However, only 35% of these students were enrolled in Algebra I.

Annually, we have about 10,000 to 12,000 students, statewide, ready to advance in their math pathway but are not given the opportunity. The head start provided by this proposal would give students more time in high school to pursue advanced math coursework aligned to their postsecondary plans, such as statistics, career-technical education courses, and computer science.

Second, we believe that all new elementary and middle school teachers should be required to demonstrate a minimum level of math competency before being permitted to lead math instruction. Today, a teacher candidate can score zero on the math portion of the licensing exam and still be certified to teach. It should come as no surprise that many students struggle with math when some of the very educators leading their instruction are themselves not required to demonstrate basic math skills.

Educator Demand Data

Teachers and administrators have been alerting policymakers and advocates that there has been a shortage of qualified teachers for the past few years. The General Assembly has created programs to address these concerns, but without collecting data, there is no way to tell where the need is greatest and if the programs are working. The House removed language proposed by the Governor that would have collected new educator demand information. **We are asking you to support amendment SC0541** that restores this language and expands it to include charter and joint vocational school districts, create a public dashboard, and collect additional information on turnover, hiring, and unfilled positions so that we can make better data informed decisions on how to tackle this challenge.

Computer Science

Computer science skills are critical for students to be successful in an ever changing economy. Our new poll found that 89% of Ohioans believe all schools should be required to offer a computer science course or coursework to students. Thankfully, the General Assembly passed the Computer Science Promise Program, or CS Promise, in the last budget. CS Promise requires that all Ohio students in grades 7-12 have access to at least one computer science course a year. However, we are concerned that not enough students and parents

know about this option. **We ask for your support for amendment SC0542**, which requires schools to proactively share information about this opportunity with parents and students in a similar way that College Credit Plus is done each year.

The Urgent Need for Career-Connected Learning and the Coalition Supporting It

Ohio is at a pivotal moment. Our economy is booming, with over 100,000 job openings paying \$50,000 or more annually, yet too many of our students leave high school unprepared to seize these opportunities. In our new report entitled [Reality Check](#), data confirms that nearly half of Ohio's graduating Class of 2017 did not pursue education or training beyond high school. At the same time, a recent statewide poll shows 86% of Ohio parents say that an individual plan that maps out a pathway to a career is important, yet half have never seen one for their child.

In an effort to tackle these issues, Ohio Excels leads the Career-Connected Learning Coalition, which includes a diverse group of 16 organizations dedicated to policy solutions that expand career-connected learning opportunities for all Ohio students. Members of the coalition include a broad range of stakeholder groups, including teachers, superintendents, school counselors, career-tech leaders, business groups, state agencies and more.

Over the last year we have worked together to develop a comprehensive career education proposal aimed at ensuring that all students across the state have access to high-quality career exploration, coaching, and pathways that align with their interests and abilities and Ohio's workforce needs. This has required deep analysis of national, state, and local level efforts and data, along with examining systems-focused, scalable policy solutions. This work over the last year has led us to coalesce around five major policy pillars for this state budget: 1) Career Exploration and Planning 2) Workforce Data 3) In-Demand Credentials 4) Work-Based Learning and 5) Expanding Career-Technical Education.

The organizations that support the coalition's proposal for the budget include the Alliance for High Quality Education, ExcelinEd, Greater Cleveland Career Consortium, Learn to Earn Dayton, Ohio Association of Career-Technical Educators, Ohio Farm Bureau, Ohio Federation of Teachers, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and Ohio Excels.

Make Career Planning Meaningful by Starting in Middle School

A foundational aspect of high-quality career-connected learning is meaningful, explicit career exploration and advising – and it should not wait until high school. We strongly support requiring structured, career exploration every middle schooler. This experience, in the form of a semester-long course or its equivalent, would ensure every student gains exposure to Ohio's 16 career fields, interprets career interest and aptitude assessments with counselors, mentors, and/or career coaches, and begins career planning experiences early. The best part is we have many examples of how schools across the state are already doing this and doing it well. It's time to make sure all of our students have the same opportunity. To ensure this work is delivered effectively and equitably statewide, middle school teachers, counselors, and anyone serving as career coaches need access to professional development aligned with Ohio's new Career Coaching Framework and Model Curricula for Career Exploration. With the right tools and training, educators, and community partners can help students build a meaningful plan for their futures. **We are asking for your support of amendment SC0530**, which would include these provisions.

Create Structures to Better Use Workforce and Education Data

Ohio has a strong foundation of education and workforce data spanning early childhood through postsecondary and employment. But we are not yet using this data to its full potential. Students, families, educators, and policymakers still lack answers to fundamental questions: Are our investments improving

student outcomes? Which programs are delivering the strongest returns? Where are students struggling—and thriving—across the education-to-workforce pipeline?

We are asking for your support of amendment SC0534, which would establish the Education and Workforce Data Insight Board—a cross-agency leadership body that brings together state agency directors and external stakeholders to provide strategic direction for Ohio’s data system. This board would help ensure our data efforts are coordinated, transparent, and—above all—focused on impact. It would support policies that link education to workforce outcomes, such as performance-based funding, and help build tools and reports that provide actionable insight for students and families.

Critically, this work will also prioritize student data privacy and responsible data use, ensuring that all efforts protect the integrity and security of student information. With the right leadership and safeguards in place, we can finally unlock the full value of our data—making smarter decisions, measuring what matters, and better serving Ohio’s students and economy.

Career Awareness & Exploration Funds

We are asking for your support of amendment SC0534, which restores \$16.325 million per year to support career awareness and exploration efforts across Ohio. This funding, which was included in previous state budgets, was eliminated in the House version and is critical to sustaining hands-on career exposure through Career-Technical Planning Districts.

These dollars fund meaningful, locally driven activities such as field trips, speaker series, career fairs, and career coaching—opportunities that help students make real-world connections between school and future careers. The flexibility of the funds allows communities to tailor programming to their regional workforce needs and student interests. Without this investment, a vital part of Ohio’s career-readiness infrastructure is at risk—particularly for younger students who benefit most from early exposure. Restoring these funds ensures that students in rural, urban, and suburban districts alike continue to have access to career exploration experiences that inspire them to see what’s possible for their futures.

Establish a Statewide High School Internship Program

Real-world experience for students is invaluable. It helps students know what they do and maybe more importantly, what they do not want to do. The coalition is proposing a new High School Internship Program, which would facilitate paid internships for high school students. The program will connect students with employers and provide critical hands-on learning experiences, not to mention access to networks, mentors and leaders they can help propel their futures forward. This program is modeled from the successful Ohio Tech Internship program. The High School Internship Program would help more students and be broader in scope providing students access to experiences beyond tech-related positions. **Please consider adopting amendment SC0532** to launch more students into viable internships!

Revisiting Industry-Recognized Credentials and the Credential Point System

Ohio has made important progress in promoting industry-recognized credentials as a way to connect education to workforce opportunity. However, it's time to take a closer look at the state’s credential system, including the approved list, 12-point valuation system, and how investments are being targeted. Currently, approximately 34% of the top credentials earned by students are valued at just one point, raising important questions about the alignment between credential value, employer demand, and student outcomes.

We support working in partnership with industry leaders and state agencies to **revisit and refine** the credential system—ensuring it reflects real workforce needs, incentivizes credentials with proven labor market value, and supports meaningful career pathways for students. To allow space for this important work, we recommend

reverting to current law on credential reimbursements and investments in this budget cycle, providing time to thoughtfully redesign the system and get it right for students, schools, and employers alike.

We Need Middle and High School Transformation

While these recommendations help build a more career-connected learning environment, one area we'd caution against at this time is revising Ohio's graduation requirements. It's time we thoroughly evaluate current course structures, competency benchmarks, and readiness standards expected of our students. A careful analysis will ensure that any changes effectively reengage and empower students in their education and best prepare them for the evolving demands of the workplace. That's why we ask you all to **please consider adopting amendment SC0533**, to revert changes made to graduation requirements back to current law.

The coalition is also in support of maintaining the language eliminating the waiver that allows schools to opt out of offering career-technical education in 7th and 8th grades. We believe every middle school student should have an opportunity to start their technical pathway if that is their desire.

Ohio has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform how we prepare students for life beyond high school. By building a strong foundation in literacy and mathematics for students and implementing the Coalition's career-connected learning recommendations, we are making moves to ensure every student graduates not just with a diploma, but with a plan, a purpose, and a pathway to success. Ohio Excels and our business partners – the Ohio Business Roundtable, the Cincinnati Business Committee, the Greater Cleveland Partnership, the Columbus Partnership, the Ohio Restaurant & Hospitality Alliance, and the Ohio Council of Retail Merchants – appreciate the opportunity to share our priorities with you today. We would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Description of Organizations Endorsing this Testimony

Columbus Partnership was founded in 2002 as a non-profit, membership-based organization of CEOs from Columbus' leading businesses and institutions. What began as eight CEOs evolved into the Partnership's current membership base of more than 70 leaders who represent the Columbus business community. The Columbus Partnership's family of organizations includes One Columbus, Smart Columbus, and Clean Energy Partners. The Partnership strategically considers how to uphold the shared vision to be the most prosperous region in the U.S. Leaders from member organizations and others convene to address opportunities to advance economic development, smart mobility, public policy, education, leadership development, philanthropy, community branding, and downtown development. <https://columbusregion.com/about-us/columbus-partnership/>

Cincinnati Business Committee (CBC) is an organization of chief executives from companies in the Greater Cincinnati area committed to identifying and providing leadership on selected issues. The members will consider initiatives that are especially important to the long-term economic vitality and well-being of the Greater Cincinnati community and in which the CBC's active involvement will make a major difference. Special emphasis is placed on economic development, education, and government affairs.

Greater Cleveland Partnership (GCP) is the region's leading economic development organization and with over 12,000 members, the largest metropolitan chamber of commerce in the nation. Guided by a board of corporate and entrepreneurial CEOs, the organization focuses on strategic initiatives, business services, and advocacy to build a vibrant business environment and region for small businesses, middle-market companies, and global corporations. It includes the Council of Smaller Enterprises (COSE) and Cleveland Development Advisors, a real estate development affiliate. GCP is committed to working with private, civic, and public partners to accelerate growth and prosperity to propel Greater Cleveland towards being one of the Great Regions in the Great Lakes. <https://greatercle.com/>

Ohio Business Roundtable (OBRT) is a statewide business association comprised of CEOs and Presidents from Ohio's largest and most influential companies. With over 125 members employing more than 600,000 Ohioans and generating over \$2.5 trillion in revenue, OBRT brings the collective voice of executive leadership to bear on key economic and policy issues shaping the future of the state. Learn more at: <https://www.ohiobrt.com/>

Ohio Council of Retail Merchants has been serving the interests of Ohio's retail and wholesale industries since 1922. Its 7,000-plus members rely on the expertise and passion of the Council leadership to promote and support initiatives that pave a positive path for the state's retail community. The Council focuses on public policy, political activity, member benefits, and research to advance a robust retail environment. Learn more at: <https://www.ocrm.net/>

Ohio Excels is a nonpartisan and nonprofit organization that engages and unites Ohio's business community on the full education-to-workforce pipeline, from early childhood, K-12, higher education, and into the workforce. We convene coalitions, conduct research, work with schools and community partners, and advocate for solutions that improve educational outcomes for all Ohio students. Learn more at: <https://www.ohioexcels.org/>

Ohio Restaurant & Hospitality Alliance (ORHA) For over a century, the Ohio Restaurant & Hospitality Alliance has served Ohio's restaurant, foodservice & hospitality industry. Focused on uniting Ohio's hospitality community and founded on innovation & thought leadership, the ORHA knows the challenges and joys our members experience operating restaurant & hospitality businesses. ORHA provides sound solutions for members in their businesses through advocacy, education, events, consultation and select products &

services. Ohio Restaurant & Hospitality Alliance proudly works to lead Ohio's hospitality community into new eras of prosperity, prominence & participation. <https://www.eatdrinkohio.org/>