



*A Voice for Ohio's DOPR Schools*

**House Bill 96  
Senate Education Committee  
Interested Party Testimony  
May 14, 2025**

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 96, the state operating budget. My name is Shawn Lenney and I am the superintendent of the Greater Ohio Virtual School, but today I'm here to speak with you on behalf of the GRADS Coalition.

The GRADS Coalition consists of eight dropout prevention and recovery (DOPR) community schools operating throughout the state, both online and brick-and-mortar. DOPR schools educate some of Ohio's most vulnerable students who have struggled in traditional school settings. Our member schools are free, public schools that provide unique learning environments and services to help our students get back on track, and most importantly, earn a high school diploma. We have proven track records which provide choice to Ohio families, nontraditional approaches to education, and our schools consistently earn ratings of Meets and Exceeds Standards on the Dropout Prevention School report card. Our communities recognize the value of our schools and are supportive in our mission.

**Support EDUCD29 and amend with SC0448 for Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid**

Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid (DPIA) helps fund vital initiatives to support wraparound services for Ohio's students who face a number of challenges. The funds are intended to help students overcome obstacles and prepare for future success. All traditional and community brick-and-mortar schools are eligible to receive DPIA as this funding is based on a district's economically disadvantaged percentage. Current law excludes DOPR e-schools from these funds and our students are deemed ineligible, however the House added a provision (EDUCD29) that would make all e-schools eligible for DPIA. But under this provision, e-school students would only be eligible for half the amount of funding, \$211 per-pupil, versus what brick-and-mortar students receive which is \$422 per-pupil.

There is strong rationale for providing DPIA funds to DOPR e-schools. Our schools primarily serve "at-risk" students many of whom have experienced trauma in their lives and are dealing with numerous social and emotional issues. For many students, a DOPR school is their last opportunity for success. We surveyed our GRADS Coalition member schools, and 64.9% of our students are economically disadvantaged. Some of the most common barriers our students experience include parenthood, extreme poverty (200% of the federal poverty level), homelessness, sexual and/or physical abuse, drug and/or alcohol abuse, bullying, limited English proficiency, high mobility and family disruptions, grade retention/age-for grade, being in the

foster care system, loss of caregivers and parents, and severe physical and/or mental health conditions.

While we are greatly appreciative of the House for including e-schools in DPIA eligibility, only allowing our students to receive half the possible funds still puts us at a disadvantage. Our students face the same barriers that exist in brick-and-mortar schools if not more, and they come to a dropout prevention and recovery school for a reason – they are already behind and at a disadvantage. Under current law, DPIA funds may be used for (among other things) dropout prevention, mental health services, physical health care services, family engagement and support services, services for homeless youth, mentoring programs, instructional technology, reading improvement and intervention, and academic interventions. DOPR e-schools earmark financial resources to many of the funding allowances listed above, but usually not at the level that is needed or we have to reallocate monies from other programs. Additionally, the increase in social and emotional needs of our students alone continues to impact the essential need for financial support.

**My colleagues and I respectfully ask that you amend HB 96 with amendment SC0448 to make e-schools eligible for DPIA funding at the same rate as brick-and-mortar schools, \$422 per-pupil.** We will use DPIA funds to hire the professionals and specialists that will help our students with the wraparound services they need. But we cannot hire these people at half the price. Without the proper support for the alternatives our schools provide, many of these students would be high school dropouts living in our communities with the probability of community dependence for an indefinite amount of time. Please help us help them, they are so deserving of every opportunity we can give them to succeed.

**Amend EDUCD43 with SC0739 to ensure younger students do not fall further behind**

HB 96 will change the definition of dropout prevention and recovery schools. Beginning in the 2027-2028 school year, only students aged 14 – 21 may enroll in a DOPR school, and, at the time of their initial enrollment, are at least one grade level behind their cohort age groups or experience crises that significantly interfere with their academic progress such that they are prevented from continuing their traditional educational programs. We understand why the Department of Education and Workforce is heading in this direction, but we believe there will be an unintended consequence, and we want to help prevent that.

The elementary and middle school-aged students that come to DOPR schools face many of the same challenges I listed earlier in this testimony that our high school and old students experience. They are at least a grade level or more behind in school, and due to whatever hardships they encounter either emotionally, or behaviorally, or at home in their lives, they cannot always make it work in a traditional school. In fact, those hardships frequently affect siblings. It is not uncommon for multiple children from a family to enroll in our schools. For parents, this means that they do not have to interact with different schools, they do not have to transport children for testing or activities to multiple schools, and there is comfort in knowing that their kids are together.

If HB 96 is enacted as currently written, the bill says that we would have to transfer our younger students to a separate community school. Again, they come to us for a reason, and it means they are struggling. Sending them to a different school does not erase the problem, and there are no other schools that specialize in dropout prevention. Our fear is that these younger students will fall so far behind in a school that does not have the tools or flexibility to meet these students with their challenges, that they will fall through the cracks and one day dropout. Which of course is the very thing our schools are designed to prevent.

Our solution is to change the dropout prevention and recovery school definition to a community school where at least 75% of its student population is between the ages of 14 – 21, and if a student turns 14 at any point in the school year, they may enroll in the DOPR school. This will allow us to primarily serve the high school and older aged students, while leaving room for younger students who quite simply will not get the services elsewhere that we provide. **The GRADS Coalition respectfully asks for your support of SC0739 to make these definition changes and ensure that there will still be room for younger kids who struggle and are at risk as much, if not more, than their older peers.**

Thank you for your time and attention to these important matters, and I would be happy to answer any questions.