

Senate Education Committee

Testimony of Marie Hanna, Superintendent of Ohio Connections Academy

May 14, 2025

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify today.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on K-12 funding. My name is Marie Hanna and I am the Superintendent of Ohio Connections Academy. Ohio Connections Academy is a public virtual charter school that serves K-12 students in every county in the state of Ohio. The school has been in operation since 2003.

I started with Ohio Connections Academy as an assistant principal in 2005 and have been the Superintendent for 12 years. I have been an educator in a variety of settings for 30 years.

Ohio Connections Academy serves students from across the state of Ohio in grades K-12. We currently have 5100 students enrolled. We serve a diverse body of students: 43% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch and 13.9% have an IEP. We work hard to meet our students where they are academically. We have a dedicated team of educators and staff who work diligently every day to educate and help the students at Ohio Connections Academy.

I am here today to speak to you about the disparity in Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid (DPIA).

Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid is an important funding tool included in the funding formula that further helps students who come from economically challenged families. Public e-Schools students are the only category of pupils that do not receive Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid in Ohio. Let me say that again. There are only 14 public schools in the entire state of Ohio that currently do not receive this vital funding and they are the online schools. The aid, which is calculated based on the number and concentration of economically disadvantaged students enrolled at each public school and district, does not take into account the 35,000 students enrolled in public e-Schools in Ohio. It is important that all students who fall into this pupil category should be included in funding as they are also in need of additional educational support and services.

At Ohio Connections Academy 43% of students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. We believe that the actual number is higher, but many families choose not to fill out the paperwork to determine eligibility. You are all aware of the pandemic learning loss that was experienced by students in Ohio and all over the country. Our school, just like other schools around the state, are seeing more students requiring remediation in order to be on grade level with their reading and math knowledge and skills. Allowing public e-School students to be counted in DPIA is important as all public schools are facing a funding cliff with the ESSER funding coming to an end. The federal relief funds have been used to provide remediation for students in math and reading through interventionists and supplemental programming. As this funding goes away, we will still need to provide these educational services to students at our school.

Our staff is also deeply committed to the science of reading, incorporating training from the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (ODEW) and utilizing resources like UFLI for targeted instruction.

An example of a resource that we want to be able to maintain and or expand is High Dosage Tutoring. We are committed to providing the best support for students on Reading Improvement Plans (RIMPs), and our partnerships with Cognition and Varsity Tutors has been a critical part of this effort. These resources have been paid for by the state of Ohio. This programming is quite expensive. We are aware that the state was using ESSER funds for this initiative. With over 400 students receiving high-dosage tutoring from these partners, totaling 40,000 sessions, we've seen remarkable improvements in both student growth and confidence in reading.

Currently, our Reading Interventionists provide high-dosage tutoring for around 100 of the 520 students on a RIMP, but without the support of the High Dosage tutoring programs, we would be unable to provide the necessary tutoring for all of our struggling readers. The small-group format of 3-4 students per session ensures that each student receives the individualized attention they need, focusing on crucial skills such as phonics, decoding, and comprehension.

High-dosage tutoring has been essential for our students' growth. The programs' consistency, personalized approach, and positive feedback from families and staff make it clear how important this support is. We would strongly recommend maintaining and expanding these programs. We are concerned about how we would fund high dosage tutoring if and when the state is no longer able to provide this to the schools. Other districts would use DPIA funds toward those initiatives. Virtual Schools do not receive DPIA funds.

To further demonstrate the need for DPIA funding for our students, I would like to share some statistics with you. At Ohio Connections Academy:

- 52.7% of students in our remediation programs are eligible for free and reduced lunch.
- 62% of students on a reading improvement plan are eligible for free and reduced lunch.
- The graduation rate for our free and reduced lunch students was 12 % lower than the overall graduation rate.

The numbers I just shared with you demonstrate that students enrolled in public virtual schools deserve DPIA funding. They are just as deserving of this funding and should not be punished because they have chosen to receive their education through a full-time public virtual school. This funding would allow us to continue the additional remediation and interventions that are in place due to ESSER and ARP funds. Specifically, Ohio Connections Academy would be able to use these DPIA funds to provide critical support like tutors, supplemental programs, and interventionists to support students in improving their math and reading skills. This funding would also pay for staffing to support our college and career readiness programming for high school students who are pursuing alternative demonstrations of competency for graduation.

I am pleased to report that for the first time since 2008, the House has included DPIA funding for online schools. However, the House proposal only funds online schools at 50% as compared to our brick in mortar counterparts. So our students will only receive \$211/student as opposed to the full \$422 that other schools receive. We are truly grateful to the House for including this important funding stream. We are asking the Senate to finish the job the House started and provide full DPIA funding to Ohio's online schools. Our students are equally important to those who attend brick and mortar schools and deserve the exact same level of service as their counterparts.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today on Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid. I am happy to answer any questions that Chair and Committee Members may have.

## Cignition High-Dosage Tutoring Update – Reading/ELA

For the 2024-2025 school year, OCA was awarded 400 elementary tutoring seats in Language Arts/Reading with Cignition, specifically for students on Reading Improvement Plans (RIMPs). Tutoring is mandatory for all students on a RIMP, and Cignition has been recognized as a high-quality provider by the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce.

### Cost Breakdown (400 Seats)

- **100 Groups:** Each with ~4 students.
- **Weekly Sessions:** 4 per group, totaling 400 sessions per week at 30 mins per session
- **Total Sessions:** 40,000 (400 groups x 100 sessions).
- **Cost:** \$42.35 per session, totaling ~\$1.7 million (fully state-funded, but OCA must cover empty sessions if they occur).

### As of 2/6/25:

- **606 students** have been placed on RIMPs, with **520 currently enrolled at OCA**.
- **Tutoring Distribution:**
  - **94 K-5 students** receive tutoring from OCA Interventionists.
  - **387 students** with Cignition.
  - **39 students** with Varsity Tutors.
- **Recent Additions:** 80+ students placed on RIMPs due to Acadience midyear testing and assigned to Cignition tutoring due to additional grant funding for OCA.

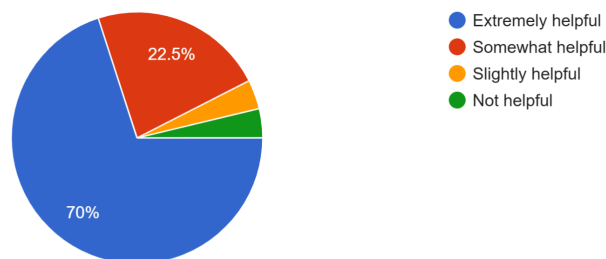
### Survey Insights

To assess effectiveness, a survey was distributed on 2/6/25 to Learning Coaches/Caretakers of students in Cignition tutoring. **80 responses** (21% response rate) measured satisfaction and impact. Additionally, on 2/13/25, **24 K-5 staff members** completed a separate survey. Key findings are summarized below.

### Learning Coaches/Caretakers Survey Responses - Highlights

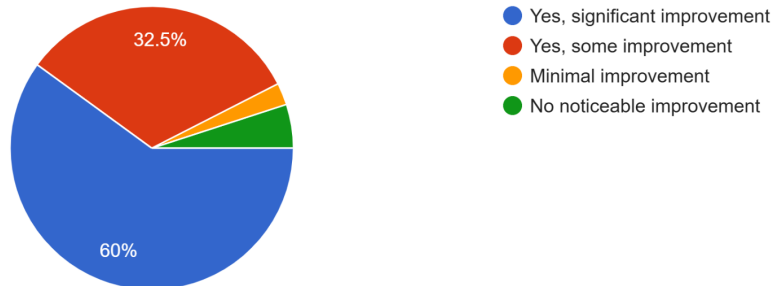
How would you rate the impact of Cignition tutoring on your child's reading skills?

80 responses



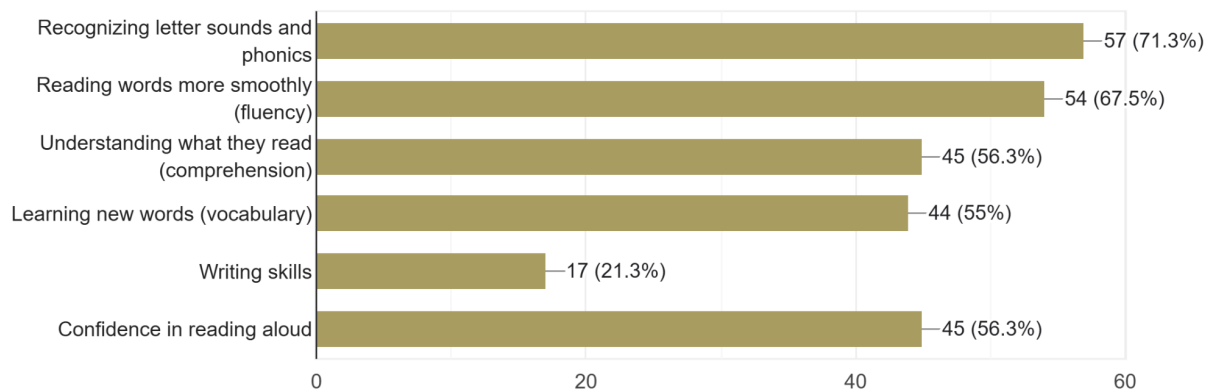
Have you noticed improvement in your child's foundational reading skills (e.g., letter sounds, blending, fluency)?

80 responses



In which areas have you seen the most growth in your child? (Check all that apply)

80 responses



### A Sample of Learning Coaches/Caretakers Survey Comments

*Being part of a small group learning experience has been really beneficial for my child. I would say it was optimal for learning when there were just 3 or 4 children total in the tutoring sessions because then there is a lot more participation and engagement for students. My child sees and learns from the tutor and the other children which has really helped him .*

*My child knows that he is not alone in needing help with reading and he gets to work through it with other kids and enjoys making friends. This has helped boost his confidence in his reading.*

*I've seen Brooklyn picking up more books and reading*

*I think it has helped my daughter to understand WHAT she reads and is able to provide better meaning to what she reads.*

*My 2nd grader has improved with his fluency and accuracy exponentially*

*I think it is beneficial and necessary for the children to have that consistency in working on their letters and sounds, reading, blending and comprehension daily with the tutor. I think it is a wonderful provision and I am grateful my child has been able to be a part of it.*

*I love that my son has this option for extra work in language arts/reading. He goes on and on about how much he enjoys his tutoring sessions with Ms. B (Sarah)*

*It has given her friendships with the teacher and peers that she sees every day. It has helped her confidence levels in everyday reading. It has given her a sense of not being alone in struggles and achievements.*

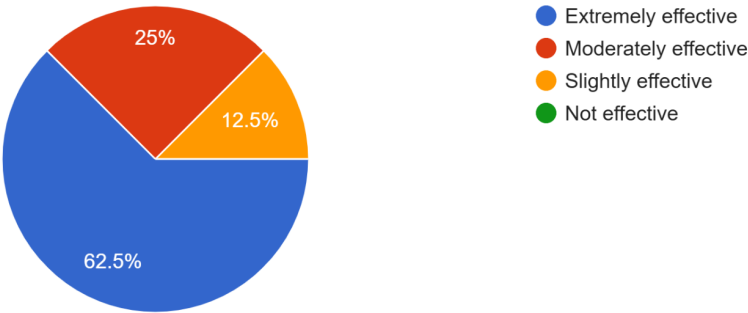
*I feel my daughter has more confidence in coming up with answers to questions about what she has read.*

*Absolutely, I feel like it has helped my young student significantly, she is excited to read to me at bedtime.*

#### **Elementary Staff Survey Responses - Highlights**

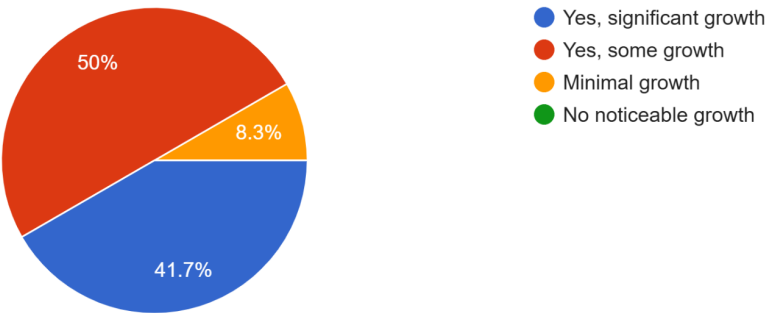
Based on your students' performance in CBA calls, small group sessions, course assessments, and Acadience benchmarks, how would you rate the impact... Cignition tutoring on students' literacy skills?

24 responses



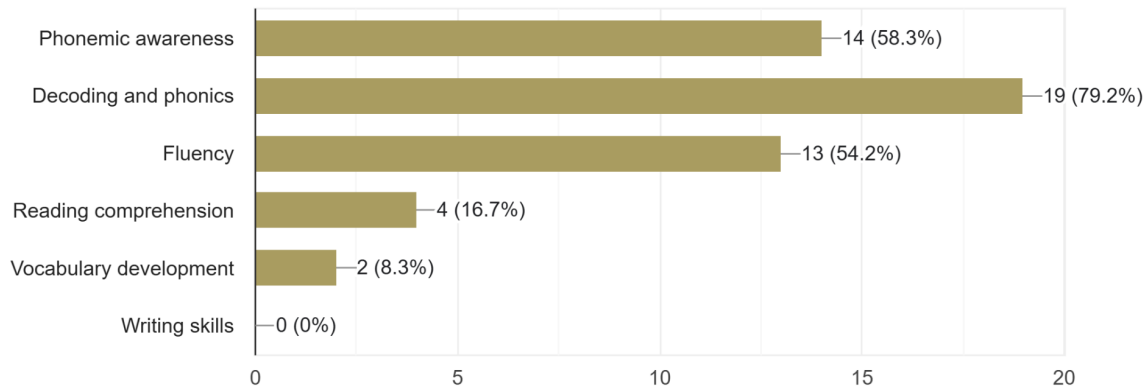
Have you observed growth in students' foundational literacy skills (phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency) as a result of Cignition tutoring?

24 responses



Which literacy areas have shown the most noticeable improvement in students who receive Cignition tutoring? (Check all that apply)

24 responses



### Summary of Staff Responses to Open-Ended Questions

*Question: What aspects of Cignition tutoring do you believe are most beneficial for students?*

**Consistency & Frequency:** Daily structured support (4x/week) reinforces reading skills.

**Targeted Skill Development:** Focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, blending, and sight words.

**Personalized Small Group Instruction:** Groups of 3-4 students allow for individualized attention.

**Trained Tutors:** Tutors specialize in reading instruction and provide valuable feedback.

**Parental Engagement:** Sessions help parents learn how to support reading development.

**Student Growth:** Regular attendance leads to noticeable progress.

**Relationship Building:** Students develop confidence and connections with their tutor.

**Structured Program:** A set, routine-based program ensures consistency and accountability.

**High-Dosage Literacy Exposure:** Frequent, focused practice improves reading skills.

*Question: Would you recommend continuing or expanding Cignition tutoring for students on a RIMP? Why or why not?*



**Strong Recommendation:** Overwhelming support for continuing or expanding Cignition tutoring.

**Positive Student Growth:** Noticeable improvements in phonics, decoding, confidence, and overall reading skills.

**Parental Approval:** Families report positive experiences and increased student engagement.

**Consistency & Small Groups:** The structured, frequent sessions in a small group setting are highly beneficial.

**Staffing Limitations:** Teachers lack capacity for high-dosage tutoring, making Cignition a valuable resource.

**Engagement Challenge:** Concern about motivating students who do not attend regularly

#### **Highlighted Staff Survey Comments:**

*I have received nothing but positive comments from families about how much their student enjoys Cignition tutoring. Their student WANTS to go to tutoring!*

*Just a few examples of students' Acadience gains in reading composite scores after using Cignition regularly.*

*mid year enrollment*

*4303336 +127*

*5339055 +73*

*5830741 +114*

*3189294 +26*

*early fall of the year enrollment*

*5531242 +65*

*I have had a lot of positive feedback from parents. Tutoring sessions have been helping with repetition, confidence and they love the small groups!*

*I feel this is the most effective program we have ever had for improving students in reading.*

Additional Data Provided by Cognition on 2/18/25:

For every 2.5 to 3 hours that a K-3 ELA student spends in tutoring (5 to 6 sessions), they gain one month of reading skill.

***Ohio Connections Academy Academic Reading Growth***

## Academic Growth

**Proficient (3 of 3 criteria)**

**Approaching Proficient (2 of 3)**

**Partially Proficient (1 of 3)**

**Emerging (0 of 3)**

### Criteria:

1. Correct Answer
2. Show evidence in the text for your answer
3. Explain your thinking

**Baseline** = Initial Mastery Check

**Current** = Latest Mastery Check

