

Molly Gaines
Secular Education Association

June 23rd, 2025

Members of the Senate Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony today regarding the “Success Sequence” bill. My name is Molly Gaines. I’m a parent of a young daughter in our public schools and also serve as Executive Director of the Secular Education Association. I’m here today to speak on behalf of both myself and the organization.

We are a national, parent-led, grassroots or dedicated to protecting the integrity of public education by advocating for a secular, inclusive, and evidence-based learning environment for all students. We are writing today in strong opposition to any effort by this body to endorse, promote, or implement the so-called “Success Sequence” in public policy or public education in the state of Ohio.

The “Success Sequence” claims that young people can avoid poverty if they simply graduate high school, get a full-time job, and marry before having children — in that order. On its surface, it may appear like practical advice. But when endorsed as policy, this narrative becomes misleading, harmful, and deeply out of touch with the realities facing Ohioans.

Let me be clear: poverty is not a result of poor personal choices — it is a consequence of systemic inequality. The “Success Sequence” ignores these realities. It dismisses the daily struggles of families living paycheck to paycheck despite working full time. It disregards the students impacted by underfunded schools, unsafe neighborhoods, rising housing costs, wage stagnation, medical debt, disabilities, racial discrimination, and lack of access to affordable childcare.

It also stigmatizes children of single parents, non-married couples, LGBTQ+ families, and those who do not — or cannot — conform to the prescribed “sequence.” This is not only unfair, it is pedagogically and morally wrong.

The most fundamental problem is that the “Success Sequence” is based on correlations, not causation. Many people who follow the steps still experience poverty and people who deviate from the sequence; still succeed and are ignored in the data. This approach is statistically misleading and cannot account for underlying structural factors.

The idea that success = high school diploma + full-time job + marriage before children is a culturally specific, middle-class, and often religiously coded script. The bill never defines what success looks like or how it will be measured. Is it financial independence? Home ownership? College degrees? Without a clear definition, this becomes a subjective and politicized label. The lack of clarity allows third-party organizations — many of which are aligned with conservative

religious agendas — to push narrow family models and behavioral expectations onto all students, regardless of background or belief.

This is not a neutral framework — it carries strong moral and cultural assumptions. It undermines local control and weaponizes vague definitions like the "Success Sequence" to push top-down moral agendas. Ohio Senate Bill 156 represents a significant and troubling shift of power away from local communities and into the hands of state-level decision-makers. SB156 effectively strips districts, cities, and counties of the ability to determine what best serves their own youth — replacing that with state-sanctioned messaging, values, and ideology.

Ohio has long valued local governance in education, recognizing that each community has unique needs. Whether rural, urban, or suburban, school districts and youth organizations must retain the ability to choose programming that reflects their local context — not a one-size-fits-all framework passed down from Columbus.

At its core, this is a bill about control — and it moves that control away from the people closest to our students and families. SB156 would continue a dangerous precedent for state overreach into arenas that should remain in the hands of local educators and elected representatives. For all these reasons and more, the Secular Education Association strongly encourages this committee's rejection of Senate Bill 156.

Respectfully submitted,

Molly Gaines

Executive Director

Secular Education Association