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Good afternoon, Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Ohio Senate Education Committee.

My name is Danielle Firsich, and I am the Director of Public Policy for Planned Parenthood Advocates of Ohio and Planned Parenthood of Greater Ohio. Thank you for accepting my testimony today in opposition to Senate Bill 156. Although SB156 aims to prevent poverty, it imposes strict and unsustainable guidelines on struggling Ohioans, especially as the cost of living rises and social welfare programs are cut at both state and federal levels.

Senate Bill 156 would require all public schools to teach the "Success Sequence" to students in grades 6-12.

The sequence claims following these steps in order prevents poverty:

1. Graduating from high school
2. Getting a full-time job
3. Waiting until marriage to have children

Success cannot be defined by a single, narrow standard. Every student deserves the opportunity to pursue a life that is meaningful to them. For some, that may include having children; for others, it may not. Likewise, marital status does not determine a person's success—whether one is single, married, with children, or without, all life paths are valid and valuable.

The inherent limitations of the success sequence curriculum are numerous. First, it entirely ignores the structural inequalities and systemic barriers that prevent individuals from achieving certain levels of individual success. It also lacks cultural competence, as it reflects a narrow, specific set of cultural norms, expectations and values that are not universally applicable to diverse Ohio communities. The focus on individual agency and framing of "poverty as a choice" is an outdated and unrealistic ideology that is not reflective of the experience of Ohioans who are struggling due to socioeconomic and political structures far beyond their control. It also deflects attention from the actual social

welfare nets and policy changes that both directly and explicitly address poverty. Lastly, this legislation appears to be an imposition of Christian, conservative social norms rather than a de facto attempt to achieve actual poverty reduction.

The success sequence curriculum's website claims that it is a "positive alternative to sex education" with "a clear emphasis on the objective benefits of reserving all sexual activity and childbearing for marriage."[1] Decades of research supports the fact that abstinence only education is not only ineffective, but actively harmful as it fails to prepare young people for safe, healthy and consensual sexual activity. Ohio remains the only state that lacks statewide standards for health education, including sex education—which is not required to be comprehensive or medically accurate.[2] We are further failing Ohio's children if we double down on these disastrous policy and educational gaps that tell our youth that living in poverty is some interpersonal failure rather than a symptom of systems that cater to the privileged few while stripping funds and resources from the most marginalized and vulnerable among us.

According to the 2024 State of Poverty in Ohio report, Ohio has the "twelfth highest poverty rate in the nation," with 13.4% of adults and nearly 18% of children living in poverty. Stunningly, the report found that Ohio families with a "single minimum-wage worker cannot make ends meet in ***any*** county," and nearly 1 in 4 Ohio children live in cost-burdened households that spend more than 30% of income on housing and associated costs.[3] In fact, the researchers found that the lack of affordable housing across the state, food insecurity due to rising costs and inflation, stagnant wages, healthcare gaps, funding cuts for social services programs like food banks and SNAP benefits, and the elimination of the highly successful child tax credit are all directly responsible for the rising rate of poverty in Ohio families.

Furthermore, the report found that "the ten Ohio counties with the lowest poverty rates for women are 4.5 times as likely to have full access to maternity care as the counties with the ten highest poverty rates for women."[3] Nowhere did this report make mention of the tenets of the success sequence curriculum that falsely claim to address and alleviate poverty. What we can see is a clear need for expanded healthcare access, social service programs, affordable housing, cost-of-living reductions, and increased wages—all of which are being effectively ignored, or purposefully weakened, by this legislature and its misguided priorities.

As noted by sociologists who have studied this curriculum:

> "Despite the ad nauseam repetition of the obvious fact that educated, employed, and (much less importantly) married people are less likely to be poor, there is no

> evidence at all that convincing people who are not one of those things of their importance will cause a reduction in poverty rates. In addition, what signals will a "success sequence" program send? What message will these campaigns send to people who are currently materially underserved by the welfare state, and people who don't have the option to pursue the sequence because stable partners, education, or jobs aren't available to them?" [4]

I believe that this legislation "offers lawmakers a palatable way to frame poverty as a matter of personal failure rather than systemic design," and I find it immensely ironic and hypocritical that many of the individuals pushing this policy do not adhere to its guidelines themselves.[5] Beyond graduating high school, the full-time job and marital expectations of this sequence are entirely dependent on personal statuses that change continually over one's lifespan. A recent study found that "on average, around 17 percent of all people who are counted as success sequence followers in one year cease to be counted that way just twelve months later."[5] Such metrics are not sustainable or realistic as individuals inevitably go through things like job loss, divorce, death of a partner, disability, or any significant change in life circumstance.

I strongly urge this committee to vote no on SB156. This is a short-sighted policy proposal that does nothing to meaningfully address the challenges and barriers facing Ohio families.

[1] www.successsequence.com

[2] https://www.statenews.org/news/2023-04-04/ohio-schools-now-require-sex-abuse-education-one-of-ohios-biggest-sex-ed-providers-cant-teach-it

[3] https://oacaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2024-OACA-Report_final-low.pdf

[4] The failure of the success sequence – Family Inequality

[5] The "Success Sequence" Argument Makes No Sense