



## **Testimony Before the Senate Finance Committee on FY26-27 Biennial Budget Recommendations for the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce**

**STEPHEN D. DACKIN, DIRECTOR**

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Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today on the executive budget recommendations for the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce. My name is Steve Dackin, and I am the Director of Education and Workforce.

Standing here today, I am excited to talk about the first budget recommendations for the Department of Education and Workforce. Two years ago, the Department's name did not include "workforce." The change expands our mission and drives our priorities as an agency. As a Cabinet agency, we are aligned with the goals and strategic vision of Governor DeWine. Through his leadership, and that of both Lt. Governor Tressel and former Lt. Governor Husted, the future of education in Ohio is indeed bright.

With the support of the General Assembly, Ohio has made significant investments to align literacy instruction to the Science of Reading, expand access to career-technical education, and support student well-being. These efforts will pay dividends for years to come. But we know this work must continue, at both the state and local levels. Ohio's schools must prepare every student for the real world of adulthood and set them on a pathway to future success.

To do this, we must stay focused on four key policy priorities: literacy, learning acceleration, workforce readiness, and student wellness. These priorities keep students at the center of our decisions. Last year, in light of these priorities, I directed our team to evaluate everything we do as an agency to ensure alignment. While there is still more to do, we have made significant strides in improving our responsiveness to stakeholders, including the General Assembly. We have focused our work and dedicated our time to addressing the needs of students, families, and educators.

The executive budget builds on the previous work championed by the General Assembly and makes strategic investments to further Governor DeWine's goal of supporting students to reach their God-given potential.

## Literacy

Two years ago, Governor DeWine challenged us to address the fact that 40% of Ohio's third graders were not reading at grade level. The General Assembly responded to that call, and I am grateful for the investment of \$171 million to improve literacy instruction. These initiatives, collectively known as ReadOhio, are well under way, but there is still more work to be done to achieve full implementation. The Department has approved curriculum, instructional materials, and reading intervention programs aligned to the Science of Reading, and schools and districts must choose materials to adopt this school year. Tens of thousands of teachers and administrators have completed training in the Science of Reading, with all educators required to do so by the end of this fiscal year. This year, 84 ReadOhio literacy coaches are supporting teachers and principals in 125 schools and promoting comprehensive literacy instruction.

While we are seeing positive trends, we cannot stop until every Ohio student has the foundational reading skills to succeed in school and beyond. Students who master strong reading skills by third grade are less likely to fall behind and more likely to graduate.

Governor DeWine is keeping his commitment to literacy in this budget. The executive budget recommends continued support for the ReadOhio literacy coaches who are leading instructional change in classrooms across the state. The coaches have been so well received because teachers can see how the coaches help them acquire the knowledge and skills needed to implement the Science of Reading. The budget also proposes that schools and districts use a portion of their state foundation funds to implement the Science of Reading, and that those with the lowest rates of literacy achievement use a larger portion of state funding to support the Science of Reading. We must accelerate our shared goal of reading proficiency for all students.

## Learning Acceleration

We also know that in order to make improvements in reading and math proficiency, our students deserve focused and engaging learning environments. Last year, the General Assembly passed legislation that requires schools and districts to adopt policies limiting access to cell phones in schools. In this budget, we are asking the legislature to require that schools and districts adopt the Department's model policy, which effectively bans cell phones during instructional time. The sooner our schools act, the sooner our students can realize the benefits of increased academic performance and reductions in bullying and discipline issues.

Effective principals have a profound impact on learning and school culture. Under the direction of Governor DeWine and the General Assembly, the Department developed a proposal for a school principal apprenticeship program. The executive budget recommends \$10 million over the biennium for this initiative. The two-year program will include coursework in the foundations of school leadership and a full year of on-the-job training as an apprentice under the mentorship of a carefully selected, high-quality principal. The goal of

the program is to develop highly skilled and motivated principals who will positively impact student learning in the schools they lead.

## Workforce Readiness

Our goal is for all students to find good jobs with sustainable wages that enable them to build happy, healthy, and productive lives right here in Ohio. As we continue to attract new business and industry to the state, a highly trained workforce is critical for long-term economic growth.

Too many students leave high school without a career plan, or the mentoring and guidance needed to prepare them for life after graduation. Each student should see the relevance of his or her learning, be exposed to practical, real-world work settings, and begin to define his or her future. The sooner we can get students thinking about their post-high school future, the more likely we are to put them on a path to reaching their full potential.

As Governor DeWine called for in his 2024 State of the State, this budget recommends requiring high schools to incorporate career planning into students' existing graduation plans. It is vital that schools collaborate with students and their parents to develop career plans that not only identify each student's career goals but also inform how students can align their high school experiences to achieve these goals.

For students to have time to consider the educational and career options available to them, we must also ensure they can access career-technical education before high school. The executive budget recommends eliminating middle-school waivers, so every seventh-grade student has access to career-technical education beginning in the 2026-27 school year. When students can explore different career fields in middle school, they expand their knowledge of what is possible and discover careers they did not even know existed. To support this work, the executive budget directs the Department to leverage up to \$7 million each year to reimagine regionally based tech prep centers to better support schools in providing students with mentoring and career advising and expanded access to career-technical education.

## Student Wellness

Governor DeWine has always put the health and well-being of children first. Student Wellness and Success Funds support student mental and physical health, services for homeless or welfare-involved youth, and before- and after-school programming. The Governor's budget recommends maintaining this critical funding for schools and districts, as well as supports for school-based health centers through the Department of Health.

In 2023, the Governor tasked the School Bus Safety Working Group with making recommendations to improve school bus safety. In partnership with the Department of Public Safety, the administration has implemented many of the recommendations. Keeping his promise, the Governor's budget proposes full implementation of these recommendations to further support the safety of Ohio's students. This includes \$30 million for a school bus safety grant program to fund safety enhancements to Ohio's school bus fleet and \$4 million for more robust driver training.

## Support for Students, Schools, and Districts

State foundation funding represents the largest part of the Department's budget, and Ohio schools rely on these funds to operate. The Governor's executive budget increases funding for Ohio's students, schools, and districts. The budget recommends the final two years of the formula phase-in, increases to the minimum state share for transportation, and updates to student enrollment and local capacity. The budget also reflects the reality that many school districts are serving fewer students with a greater capacity to raise revenues locally. It begins to address guarantee provisions by adjusting funding floors to 95% of existing levels in FY26 and 90% in FY27.

The budget also continues the state's commitment to choice, maintaining eligibility and access for each of Ohio's five scholarship programs, including universal access to the EdChoice Expansion scholarship program.

Finally, quality school choice options also include community schools and STEM schools. Each of Governor DeWine's budgets has addressed the funding disparities between community schools, STEM schools, and the traditional districts in which they are located, while also focusing resources on community schools that are successfully raising student achievement. The executive budget proposal maintains the Quality Community School and Independent STEM School Support program, recommends increasing facility funding from \$1,000 to \$1,500 per pupil, and expands the equity supplement to include our eight independent STEM schools.

## Conclusion

I applaud the Governor for continuing to prioritize students, families, and educators. This budget takes the next steps toward fulfilling our key policy priorities. I look forward to working closely with the Finance Committee and the Education Committee to further explore the details of the budget recommendations for the Department of Education and Workforce.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.