

# **TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE**

**JUNE 11, 2015**

**ANDREW BENSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SMARTER SCHOOLS**

Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chairman Coley, and Ranking Minority Member Skindell,

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony to the Senate Finance Committee. I am Andrew Benson, Executive Director of Smarter Schools, a non-profit organization in Cincinnati that sponsors the Ohio Blended Learning Network. I am here to oppose the cuts to the Straight A Fund proposed in Sub. HB 64 and the next biennial budget.

Let me first tell you about the Ohio Blended Learning Network. It includes 60 school districts, charter schools and support organizations that want to implement high-quality blended learning in Ohio classrooms. The Network represents more than 275,000 students.

To help support our members, we are providing more than 100 principals special training to help usher in better use of technology to improve student outcomes. The Leadership in Blended Learning program is part of a national pilot offered by the Friday Institute in North Carolina and The Learning Accelerator, a California-based non-profit promoting high-quality blended learning. We were one of seven entities nationally to secure this grant program.

We are also working with The Learning Accelerator and the Clayton Christensen Institute on a survey of Ohio school districts and charter schools to gauge the interest in and status of blended learning and what educators say they need to succeed. That report is forthcoming, but I can tell you that 58% of respondents are implementing some blended learning and most of them said they wished they had more time and support to plan and provide professional development.

In all of our contacts nationally, we found that Ohio is known for its willingness to invest in innovation through the Straight A Fund. The Fund has burnished the state's reputation as one that will do what it takes to help schools and districts innovate to transform teaching and learning in a way that helps students succeed.

As is the case in any field, putting dollars into innovation can result in cost-savings, improved performance, and a resulting competitive advantage. The Straight A Fund has seeded innovative practices across the state in numerous aspects of education delivery. Indeed, more than \$90 million of the \$250 million were in 21 projects that included some element of digital learning.

I'm very familiar with two Straight A Fund grants. The first is to Mentor Public Schools and Kirtland Local Schools in Northeast Ohio. Mentor has catapulted to the

national stage as a school district that has the appetite to shift old methods of teaching to instruction that puts students at the center and gives the teachers the technology and knowledge to stretch their expertise much farther than they ever imagined. That's because technology is integrated into their work in a way that makes teaching and learning more effective. Take a moment to reflect on how technology has changed your livelihood or the professions of your friends and family. I know mine has been turned on its head.

Mentor and Kirtland are using the grant to develop a state-of-the-art professional development space and other tools and courses for high school teachers and students to learn in a technologically rich environment. The facility and practices will serve as a template for others, and Mentor will be providing technical assistance to other districts and schools. That grant project is progressing well.

The second Straight A Fund grant was to the Milford Exempted Village Schools and the Cincinnati Public Schools, and I participated as project manager. The project was to advance a tool for teachers to deliver STEM subjects more effectively. The case-based learning method, adapted from practices at Harvard University and medical schools, brought to elementary and middle school teachers and students real-world applications of STEM skills through meaningful projects with Cincinnati area businesses like Macy's, 3M, and Madison Gelato and non-profits like the Taft Museum of Art and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. Our third-party evaluation showed that teachers learned the methods and students met the learning objectives set out by teachers. Participating schools continued the work into a second year.

Is every project as successful? It is likely that there will be failures to learn from when investing in innovation. The Ohio Department of Education has set up a serious effort to learn from the successes and failures and apply those learnings so that others can learn. ODE has done a great job overseeing the Straight A Fund from the very beginning.

I can tell you that organizations like The Learning Accelerator and the Clayton Christensen Institute are talking about using their resources to help Ohio schools and districts plan and design better blended learning projects for the fund next year.

Two years ago, I testified to this committee [in support of](#) the creation of the fund. I am glad that the state decided to follow the lead of Gov. Kasich and Superintendent Ross. I think that the Straight A Fund is paying off already, and it will surely pay off in the future as projects mature. It would be a shame to pull the plug on the innovation fund when there is much more to be learned.

Please restore the Straight A Fund to Sub. HB 64. Thank you for your time.