

Statement to the Senate Finance Committee in favor of Senate Bill 298

Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chair Coley, Ranking Member Skindell, and members of the Senate Finance Committee:

My name is Brianne Kramer, and I am here to discuss my experiences as a high school advisor at Ohio Virtual Academy (OHVA, hereafter), a K12, Inc. owned school. I worked at OHVA from November 2013 to November 2014. I have been in education for the past 12 years as a high school teacher, part-time college faculty, and now as a college professor at Ohio Northern University. In addition to my personal experiences at a virtual school, much of my doctoral level research has focused on charter schools within the state of Ohio and virtual/e-schools nationwide. I state these things in order to show you the various knowledge and understandings I have on issues related to virtual schools. Due to the experiences and evidence I will outline, I fully support Senate Bill 298 as proposed.

I initially sought out a position at a virtual school because I wanted to return to full-time employment. I had previously interviewed several virtual school teachers for a research project, and they made their positions sound very interesting which sparked my curiosity to see a new type of school. I had my reservations about how such a school would operate, but I decided I could not make any concrete judgments until I was in the environment. During the 2013-2014 school year, I acted as a high school advisor, covering the maternity leaves of two other advisors. Although I had slight issues with attendance and low student grades, I ended the school year with a slightly favorable belief in the school. The 2014-2015 school year proved to be much different. There were multiple issues with student attendance, truancy, and low student achievement that did not seem to be a concern of the administration. The only concern of those in the K12 administration was gaining more students in order to make larger profits.

One of the most important impacts Senate Bill 298 would have on virtual schools is on attendance standards. During my time at OHVA, I saw attendance issues that were so outrageous, I could not fathom how the school was able to skirt the system. When I left in November 2014, there were 487 K-12th grade students who had not yet logged attendance hours, and only 89 of those students were currently in the truancy reporting system after 11 weeks of school. There were also 1,826 students who were missing 25 or more hours of attendance, and of those students, only 594 had begun the truancy process. I find it appalling that in November 2014, 19% of OHVA students were short 25 hours or more, enough to begin the truancy process.

Based on my experience at OHVA, I believe there were more students than this who were not truly attending school, even though their attendance hours were up to date. There are two systems to the school—the OLS, which is the overall school, and the LMS, the learning management system where the students' classes were found. When parents or guardians logged attendance hours, they used the OLS system. The LMS system kept track of the time the students spent in their classrooms or in Class Connects. All course materials and assignments were in the classrooms, and the Class Connects were the live video platforms

where teachers would hold classes at designated times throughout the school day. Because of the way these two systems are set up, it does not allow for an accurate portrayal of a student's attendance. For example, a student may have only logged into the LMS for 3 hours that week, but the student's parent or guardian had logged 25 hours for the week. While OHVA does indicate that some student work hours are outside the LMS, I believe the attendance reported to the state should reflect the actual time spent in the classroom. If public, private, parochial, and seated charter school students must log 920 hours **at school**, then virtual school students should be required to log the same amount of time using the LMS classroom platform.

Other issues more common in virtual schools are the mobility rate and student learning loss. OHVA's mobility rate is 39%, far higher than the average mobility rate of 20% found at larger urban schools in the state. In the current climate of standardized tests, when a student returns to their home district, any state assessments reflect on the student's current district. Even if that student returned to their home district the day before testing, those test scores have no impact on the school that the student was enrolled in previously. There are no policies in place to take into account the learning the student may have lost during their time at a virtual school. A 2015 study by the Stanford Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found virtual school students lost 72 days of learning, on average, in reading, and lost 180 days of learning in math. Low attendance and high churn rates could certainly contribute to this loss of learning. With the churn rate at OHVA being cited by multiple sources as high as 51%, public school districts bear the brunt of the outcomes of online education when those students return to their local schools.

Since their inception, virtual schools in Ohio have not performed well. Looking at Ohio Virtual Academy alone, from 2003-2012, the Ohio Department of Education ranked the school as Continuous Improvement for seven out of nine school years. During the past three school years, OHVA has earned an F on the indicators met. In addition, the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years, OHVA did not meet AYP, and the results from the 2014-2015 report card can also be taken into question. The April 2016 report from the National Education Policy Center shows that Ohio has the most students enrolled in full-time virtual schools, yet the 16 full-time virtual schools in Ohio failed to meet or exceed the benchmark expectations on last year's PARCC assessments.

Virtual schools also need to be held to the same standards of transparency as public schools. Currently, virtual schools' board meetings are not made widely known to the families they serve. OHVA puts the school board information on their website, but does not indicate whether or not these meetings are open to the public. In addition, the OHVA website states that board meeting minutes will be posted after approval at the next meeting. Today is May 3rd, and minutes have only been posted for the August 18, 2015 and October 20, 2015 meetings. Based on the schedule OHVA set, they are not giving out timely information to their families and stakeholders. Meetings from December 15, 2015 and February 16, 2016 have not been posted. With all the controversy surrounding virtual schools, and more recently, OHVA and ECOT, board meetings should be live-streamed after proper notice has been given to the families the schools serve, their stakeholders, and the

general public. If these virtual schools are considered “public” schools, the public whose tax money funds their operation should have every opportunity to learn more about the school and its operation. Anyone is welcome to attend public school districts’ board meetings, so virtual schools should be held to the same standards.

Some members of the committee or people in the audience may wonder why there is another bill being proposed for virtual schools, since House Bill 2 was passed in October 2015. House Bill 2 focuses on the sponsors, not the charter or virtual schools themselves. Furthermore, the bill did not specify how the state plans to evaluate those sponsors. The law focuses more on administrative tasks and does not focus on how charter and virtual schools are effectively serving the students they enroll. House Bill 2 also does not close loopholes in funding issues that result in public school districts subsidizing charter and virtual schools, does not directly close charter/virtual schools who are underperforming, and does not tighten automatic school closure laws. Senate Bill 298 will help close some of these gaps in accountability, attendance, transparency, oversight, and funding.

I urge you to pass Senate Bill 298 to better serve the students and families who seek out this type of education. Chairman Oelslager, you championed stricter accountability standards in 2005, stating the charter schools at that time “have failed miserably.” Here we are over ten years later, and your statement could now be used to describe virtual schools in Ohio. As a professor, I would not want my pre-service teachers to teach in a virtual school. As a parent, I would not send my children to a virtual school. As a concerned citizen, I want reassurance that my tax money that is being diverted from my local school district to the virtual schools be used to promote quality education, not further profit-making schemes at the corporate level.

All students in the state of Ohio are entitled to a quality education. I believe it is our duty to ensure the proper policies are in place to ensure this for all children. If children are not in class and if they are not engaged in learning, is that really a quality education? If parents can simply input hours with very little penalty from the virtual school, is that a quality education? Stronger attendance standards are needed to prevent the things I’ve shared with you today from happening in virtual schools in the future.

Chairman Oelslager and members of the committee-- thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony in favor of Senate Bill 298.