

Testimony by Dr. Kristin Stewart, Ohio Virtual Academy Senior Head of School

May 10, 2016

Good afternoon Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chair Coley, Ranking Minority Member Skindell, and members of the Senate Finance Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. Last week, a former employee who served at Ohio Virtual Academy for less than a year made inaccurate and incomplete claims about our school. I felt it was important to come and set the facts straight about OHVA, its attendance policies, and commitment to compliance.

Last year, similar claims about our school were made by an unidentified source who wrongly obtained and disseminated student information. The allegation that OHVA was violating the state's attendance and truancy laws was completely false. Our school's authorizer, Ohio Council of Community Schools, conducted a full review of the records in question and found no evidence to substantiate the allegations. Indeed, OHVA's attendance and truancy policies and procedures are actually more rigorous than state law. The Ohio Department of Education accepted the findings. Further, our school welcomed an additional audit by the State Auditor to demonstrate our commitment to full compliance. Ohio Virtual Academy has a strong record of compliance.

Ohio education code states that chronically truant students with no legitimate excuse who fail to participate in 105 consecutive hours of learning must be removed from the community school's roster. Students who meet that threshold at OHVA are removed and the school no longer receives funding for those students. Our school does not receive full funding for a student unless he or she meets 920 hours of attendance.

As in all schools in the state of Ohio, there are students at our school who, at times, fall behind. The reasons are numerous and not specific to online schools. However, OHVA provides tiers of support to students who fall behind. Some of these kids are first year transfer students who had dropped out, failed, or struggled to stay engaged in their previous school.

At OHVA, all students who fall behind are monitored. If a student is 50 hours behind – halfway to mandatory withdrawal – our Family Academic Success Team kicks in. This team of educators provides an additional layer of support services to help students get back on track and achieve. The claim that these students are simply languishing with no help is flatly wrong. In fact, they are given more attention, as they should, since something is obviously wrong and they need help. Our educators work directly with the students and their parents or guardians. We have many success stories of students who re-engage and are able to achieve in our school.

The testimony given last week also suggested that "log in" time equals total instruction time. Again, that is not accurate. Online learning is not the only marker of attendance. OHVA students, especially at the younger grades, are engaged in online and offline learning. It is the combined online and offline learning time that counts toward attendance. We do not require our kindergarteners to be in front of a

computer for six hours a day. Our program provides numerous offline learning activities such as book reading, writing, art and science projects, and other hands-on learning activities using the vast amount of materials that we provide to each student.

E-schools are public schools of choice. They accept all students across the state, regardless of geographic, socioeconomic or academic circumstance. As such, they have higher mobility rates than traditional schools where student enrollment is based on zones and district boundaries. Ohio controls for mobility when assessing school performance. Left out of the testimony given last week was that OHVA's value-added progress grade increased to an "A" when factoring in mobility. In other words, students who engage and stay in our school make strong progress. This is why our school works so hard to help all students who come to us engage and stay engaged in our program, whether they are high performing or academically at-risk.

Let me address a couple other points very briefly:

OHVA is governed by an independent, nonprofit board of directors made up of a volunteer group of committed parents and community leaders. They hold open public meetings and comply with all rules and regulations. Our school is transparent and accountable, and takes its compliance responsibilities very seriously.

Let me give you a very recent example of our commitment to compliance: Our school just wrapped up state testing, and it is absolutely unlike anything traditional schools or districts face. Over a period of four weeks, our team of educators tested over 7,000 students at 55 different testing sites across the state. You see, we don't have one building where kids come every day for instruction and to take state tests. During testing, parents transport their kids to and from testing sites every day until testing is completed. Many of our teachers are away from home and stay in hotels for days to prepare sites and proctor tests. Parents re-arrange their family schedules around testing. We rented the facilities, readied 4,000 computers, and worked all year on planning and logistics. It is a monumental undertaking for our teachers, staff, and families.

Overall, OHVA had a 97% test participation rate, exceeding the requirement.

This is the kind of effort that our teachers and staff do every day on behalf of students, families, and in service of Ohio's public education. They do it not to seek attention or applause. They do it for kids. Which is why it is so demeaning when critics disparage our school, hurl unfounded allegations, and question our motives as educators. Our students' successes, our teachers' sacrifices, and our school's good works are often ignored. But I know our 370 teachers and staff, along with me, are as committed as ever to serving the needs of all our students, and complying with state laws and regulations. I've been an educator my whole life, and I am so proud to lead this school, the Ohio Virtual Academy.

Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions.