



FINDLAY DIGITAL ACADEMY

Where Learning Fits You™

Rosemary Rooker, Superintendent ♦ Michael Brand, Principal ♦ Stephen Earnest, Treasurer

Senate Education Committee E-School Funding Reforms for Dropout Prevention and Recovery Schools

Chairwoman Lehner, Vice Chair Brenner and Ranking Member Fedor and members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide comments today on the need to reform the funding formula for Dropout Prevention and Recovery (DOPR) E-schools. As members of the Ohio Senate Education Committee who are directly involved in the educational decisions being made for the students of Ohio schools, I would like to thank you for turning your attention to the challenge that is faced by DOPR E-schools who support and educate over 7,000 of Ohio's at-risk students. The passage of a three-tiered funding model for DOPR E-schools that has been proposed by Senator Brenner is essential to schools like mine who face uncertainty heading into the upcoming school year.

My name is Rosemary Rooker, and I am the Superintendent of Findlay Digital Academy (FDA), a DOPR E-school. We are a district sponsored community school located in northwest Ohio in Hancock County, where we serve students ages 14-22. Our students originate from 15 surrounding school districts, and our enrollment ranges from 150-170 students.

Over the last 16 years, Findlay Digital Academy's method of delivery has proven to be successful for students that have chosen a non-traditional approach to education. The majority of our students have experienced trauma in their lives and are at-risk of dropping out of school. Motivation and engagement for this group is a constant challenge. Without alternatives, such as our program, many of these students would be high school dropouts living in our communities depending on our community services or be involved in the opioid crisis. Even so, we have been able to meet the many needs of our students. We have consistently earned ratings of Meets and Exceeds Standards on the DOPR School Report Card. Our graduation rates have been some of the highest in the state for similar schools. Over just the last 5 school years, FDA's 4-year graduation rates have ranged from 50.5% to 81.7% when the state average for like schools range from 21.7% to 26.8%. We have found this success by offering an intensive program that uses mentors to build relationships with students and supports them not only academically, but also with their

social/emotional needs. Our community recognizes the value of our school and has been supportive of our mission.

Without reforms to the current funding model, I am uncertain of the future of Findlay Digital Academy. Similar DOPR E-Schools who are also having a direct positive impact on their communities, are in danger of closing because of the struggles we face related to funding. In 2019, there were only 9 DOPR E-schools left in the state. These DOPR schools are tied to a participation-based funding system that does not support the cost of educating some of the most vulnerable students in our communities. Over the past four years, FDA along with other DOPR E-Schools have been limited in the amount of funding received to operate. This funding model is unique to E-schools as traditional brick and mortar schools receive funding based on enrollment, even during the most recent COVID-19 pandemic, where schools were closed and forced to provide online classes. Our schools experience many similar costs as traditional schools and we also provide technology and access for students to participate. Addressing the social emotional needs, academic needs and providing experiences for pathways to success after graduation for this at-risk group of students presents itself to be a challenge when appropriate funding is not available.

In a 2019 “Study of Internet- or Computer-Based Community School Funding Models” report from the Ohio Department of Education, it was stated that DOPR E-Schools acquired only 73.1% of their maximum FTE’s because of conditions set in documenting learning opportunities. How long can any school, let alone a DOPR E-School continue to provide this much needed educational alternative without the appropriate funding? Our DOPR schools educate and provide support services to over 7,000 students and they are only received 73.1% of their funding!

Similar to traditional schools, we have many unknowns facing us for the 2020/21 school year. With traditional schools being able to offer students an option for remote learning and receive full funding, this is the time to pass an amendment to reform the funding model for the DOPR E-schools. If this issue is not addressed, I am fearful that DOPR schools will not be able to continue to exist. I am grateful that Senator Brenner has brought to you a proposal that offers a more appropriate funding calculation for DOPR E-schools.

Through a three-tiered funding model, DOPR schools would be funded for not just “hours” but also for student accomplishments. This model would: 1) provide a base funding amount to cover the fixed costs of enrolling a student, 2) provide funding for student participation (similar to today’s model), and 3) provide funding based on student achievement (earning credits). This funding model is specific to DOPR E-schools and would not apply to other e-schools operating in Ohio.

I believe that we have the same ultimate goal for ALL Ohio students....to complete their education, earn a diploma and be proud, productive members of our community. With that in mind, it is important for you to remember that DOPR schools often serve as the final safety net for students who have left the traditional system. I ask that you not leave these students behind and that you support this solution that will meet the needs of these vulnerable young people.

Thank you for all you do for Ohio and for your consideration of resolving this issue.

Sincerely,
Rosemary Rooker