

Ohio Online Learning Coalition

December 15, 2020

H.B. 409 (Koehler) Proponent Testimony

Chair Lehner, Vice-Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Committee in support of H.B. 409.

My name is Colleen Grady, and I serve as the executive director of the Ohio Online Learning Coalition. The Ohio Online Learning Coalition represents Ohio's online community schools, focusing on best practices, identifying ways to enrich students' experience with online education, and sharing information about the advantages offered by technology-based instruction.

Beginning five years ago with the passage of H.B. 2, the community school sector has been the focus of increased scrutiny and policy changes. With a focus on accountability and transparency, the legislative action resulted in substantial changes in the charter sector as a whole and online community schools in particular. Building on previous legislative changes, H.B. 409 takes the next step and provides online community schools additional tools to improve student participation and achievement.

As we have seen during the pandemic, online or remote education is an important and necessary option. Online education offers additional flexibility for students and teachers. Technology-based instruction in both blended and virtual environments continues to grow in importance. It allows schools to customize instruction based on student needs, making adjustments in the depth, breadth, and pace of instruction. Online schools can offer access to content not available in all traditional settings. Finally, using technology is a skill valued by employers, allowing employees to acquire skills and earn credentials when and where it works best for them.

Requirements for enrolling in an online community school are somewhat more complicated than enrollment in a district or brick and mortar community schools. Most online schools require that students and parents participate in an orientation before beginning their studies. Additionally, online community school students are not officially reported as enrolled until they receive their computer and log on to the school's system for the first time. Once the initial log-on takes place and students begin their studies, schools must document participation in online and offline learning activities.

Online community schools work with students and families to explain expectations for participation before enrolling, but sometimes additional intervention by the school is necessary.

Existing law requires all community schools to withdraw students from the school once they reach 72 hours of consecutive unexcused absences. Once that standard is met, students are withdrawn, although they can request to be re-enrolled, and the 72-hour clock begins again. Online community schools must re-enroll these students, even if students have previously been withdrawn. Online community schools cannot withdraw students that routinely come close to the 72-hour limit before re-engaging with school work. Students under the age of 18 are referred for truancy, but nothing makes up for students' lost time and opportunity to move forward.

H.B. 409 provides additional tools to online community schools to intervene earlier to address lack of engagement, and in some cases, withdraw students before they reach the 72-hour level. This legislation also limits students' ability to continually re-enroll without consistent participation. H.B. 409 does not eliminate the standard to withdraw students that meet the 72-hour; it allows schools to accelerate the withdrawal process when appropriate.

Besides providing tools to online community schools, H.B. 409 increases accountability for both schools and individual students. Customized intervention plans assist schools in serving students and empower students to take more responsibility for their education.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of H.B. 409.