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House Primary & Secondary Education Committee

Testimony on House Bill 497

Lisa A. Gray, Ohio Excels
May 10, 2022

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Bird, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 497 (HB 497). My name is Lisa Gray, and I am the President of Ohio Excels. We are a non-partisan, non-profit organization created by leaders of Ohio's business community who are committed to helping improve educational outcomes for Ohio's students and ensuring that all K-12 schools prepare students for success in the next step of their lives, whether it is higher education, the military, or the workforce.

I am here today on behalf of Ohio Excels and our partners in the business community to express our concern about the bill's proposed changes to the Third Grade Reading Guarantee and to highlight the urgent need to support our youngest readers.

We believe there is no more significant benchmark in education than ensuring students are proficient readers before they leave elementary school. According to the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#), students who do not read proficiently by the third grade are four times more likely to leave high school without a diploma compared to proficient readers. If the student is economically disadvantaged this risk is multiplied, and they are actually six times more likely to not graduate. Research by the [Ohio Department of Education](#) found that students who are proficient in reading by third grade were five times more likely to be college and career ready.

In addition, a recent report developed by researchers from The Ohio State University for the Ohio Department of Education found that third graders in our state experienced a 22 percent reduction in reading proficiency during the pandemic, down from 66.7 percent in the 2018-19 school year to 51.9 percent in 2020-21. Given how critical this age is to developing lifelong reading ability, such a significant drop in this short amount of time should set off loud, glaring alarms among educators and parents statewide – as well as our state's leaders. If we are going to shrink the skills gap in Ohio and secure the future of our children and the economy of the state, we need all our students to be proficient readers.

Ohio Excels and our business partners are seriously alarmed at the reading proficiency rates we saw on the recent state report cards. A quarter of school districts had fewer than 50% of their students score proficient on the state's English Language Arts assessment. Ten Ohio school districts had fewer than 20% of their students score proficient, and one had as few as 10.1% score as proficient.

We know lower scores are a consequence of the pandemic, but we also know that we have been struggling to support our young readers even prior to the pandemic. Regardless of the reason, these low proficiency rates are shocking and present a challenge now and for the future. We can delay policy consequences for students now, but schools must go above and beyond to catch students up. The expectations of colleges, employers, and the military will remain high and will grow. We must act immediately to begin getting our students back on track.

In 2012, the Ohio General Assembly passed the Third Grade Reading Guarantee. A critical piece of legislation aimed at ensuring that no Ohio student left elementary school unable to read. It also outlined critical supports and interventions to ensure that students received the help and support they needed as soon as possible. That is why the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment and first and second grade diagnostic assessments are required. It is why parent notifications are required. It is why reading improvement plans are required. It is why retention is required if, after all these interventions and supports are provided, a child still cannot read.

But we need to be honest with ourselves, our children, our families, and our communities: Ohio's children continue to be socially promoted even though they cannot read at a proficient level. In digging into the law, we learn that the "promotion rate" for third grade reading is not a "proficient rate." In fact, promotion is set at a basic level. Further, we have added numerous "alternative assessments" that may or may not be aligned with the expectations of the state's third grade reading test – a test that we know is benchmarked to the standards developed by Ohio's teachers. And we know from data beyond the third-grade year that many of our students continue to struggle with reading well past the third grade. Based on 2018-19 data, at least 30 percent of students statewide at every grade level consistently scored below proficient in reading. Ohio Excels is working with researchers over the next few months to identify more detailed outcomes for students reading below grade level at the end of the third grade.

We believe that the accommodations provided by the General Assembly in previous legislation addressed the disruptions caused by the pandemic are sufficient. A permanent removal of the retention component is not warranted. Instead, we strongly believe we need to be more urgent, bold, and comprehensive in our approach to supports. And, most important, we need to be willing to face this challenge directly, courageously, and more transparently. The data and rhetoric do not match up, and it is our students who pay the price.

We are keenly aware of Chair Manning's passion for this issue and applaud her consistent focus on our students' success, especially as it relates to early reading. We would like to work with Chair Manning and others of you to pause this legislation so that we can work together, in a bipartisan way, to better ensure the success of Ohio's children. What we need is an ambitious and strategic set of policies and supports based on brain research, science, and data to ensure our students read better and that our educators have the most current knowledge and skills to support *all* children. We cannot simply continue to just measure and discuss the problem; we must solve it.

We believe these policies must focus on several key priorities:

- Focus literacy identification and supports as early as possible, including before kindergarten
 - Our early learning opportunities should focus on literacy, and diagnostics and interventions should occur well before third grade.
- Communicate honestly and in a timely manner with families about their child's reading ability
 - Families need to know how their children are doing, and in states that have moved the needle on reading, they enlist families as a key partner in reading interventions.

- Provide targeted, proven interventions right away to students not reading at grade level
 - We should use research-based best practices and the science of reading to guide interventions that go above and beyond the typical reading curriculum to help students catch up.
- Use data on Ohio student performance in third grade reading and beyond to drive decisions
 - This could include a statewide reading data dashboard to share the reading progress of all Ohio students in grades K-12, not just elementary school data.
- Ensure teachers are prepared for reading instruction and kept up to date on effective strategies
 - For example, we should ensure all current and preservice teachers can utilize multiple strategies and methods to reach all students.
- Equip educators with the supports and resources they need to ensure all students are reading
 - The state, regional partners, and schools should make sure teachers have the materials, coaching, and capacity they need to effectively help students.
- Build on work of existing state initiatives and exemplary local work that is making a difference
 - Expand on initiatives like the First Lady's [Imagination Library](#), the [Ohio Ready to Read](#) initiative, sponsored by the Ohio Library Council and the State Library of Ohio, in addition to scaling up or adopting the many successful local community reading initiatives found across our state.

Bringing students up to grade level in reading will not be an easy task. There is a lot to discuss for a statewide strategy and a need for careful implementation at the regional and local level. Fortunately, Ohio's schools have received billions of dollars in federal funding over the past two years dedicated to mitigating education loss. These dollars, coupled with existing state and federal investments, allow our schools to provide interventions and supports that may not have been possible until now.

Ohio must commit itself to providing the most robust and targeted supports to our children. They deserve nothing less. Their future, and the future of our state, depends on it. Ohio Excels and our business community partners urge you to reconsider this legislation and join with us to develop an urgent and comprehensive set of policies and supports to help our students.

Our recent op-ed included in the [Columbus Dispatch](#) and Akron Beacon Journal says it best:

“Ohio’s future is in how much Ohioans know, and our businesses thrive when Ohioans have skills and knowledge greater than those of their competitors in other states or around the world. And an essential skill for the acquisition of knowledge in the modern world is the ability to read. Regardless of which side we are on in today’s political debates, can’t we still all agree that reading is important? Can’t we still come together to make sure our children can read and that they receive extra support when they fall behind?”

“We could not do much about the pandemic, but we can do something about how we care for and support the most vulnerable among us who have been hurt by it. Let’s refocus our priorities and help Ohio’s children catch up academically from the pandemic and move forward at the needed pace in developing essential reading skills. Then they can grow up to be Ohioans who can care for themselves and their families, contribute to our state’s long tradition of innovation and discovery, and think for themselves.”

Thank you again for the opportunity to share our testimony, and I am happy to answer any questions you might have.