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President, Ohio Excels

Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee

Senate Bill 8

Lisa Gray, Ohio Excels
February 9, 2021

Chairman Peterson, Vice Chair Schuring, Ranking Member Williams, and members of the Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Senate Bill 8 (SB 8). My name is Lisa Gray, and I am the President of Ohio Excels.

Ohio Excels is a coalition of business leaders focused on helping to improve the educational outcomes for all Ohio students. Our focus on education includes early childhood, K-12 and postsecondary education experiences. And, as part of that, we are committed to working with the broader business community, policymakers, educators, and other community leaders to support our students, educators, and schools.

All of our lives have been disrupted in some way due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Every portion of our population has been adapting to new ways to complete our daily tasks so that we can keep our friends and family safe. This also includes our K-12 and postsecondary students throughout the state. Following the stay-at-home order, a mass experiment of remote learning was undertaken to ensure our students were engaged and on track for success with minimal educational disruptions. This experience has highlighted and exacerbated the digital gap in our state, which has left far too many students at a disadvantage from the rest of their peers. Broadband is not a luxury anymore – every Ohioan needs access to participate in our democracy, education, media, health and employment. Equitable access to broadband is a critical infrastructure investment that will help to ensure that every student receives the education they deserve.

Current implementations of remote learning typically rely on platforms that require speeds necessary for video conferencing, lesson streaming, assignment downloads, and more. Often, households have more than one person utilizing the connection at the same time. This potentially includes multiple students or one or both parents working from home. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) recommends speeds at a minimum of what SB 8 describes as *tier 1* – or 10 megabits per second – for two users. Four

users require at least 25 megabits per second according to the FCC, which aligns with this bill's *tier 2* qualification.

While many short-term solutions, such as hotspots, have been deployed, this does not solve the broader issue at hand, which is the urgency for consistent, dependable, quality access to broadband that can serve the needs of our students and their families everyday – whether we are in a crisis or not. In order to be effective, broadband access must have reliable connectivity and low latency to ensure a consistent and uninterrupted education experience.

The current state of broadband has limitations, including:

- Coverage: Some last-mile regions lack access to any broadband delivery method. The complete lack of access in these unserved areas, most of which are in the southeast region of the state can lead to students who are completely disconnected from any educational experience.
- Speed: Rural regions that do have access often have low-performing, outdated internet delivery methods. This results in outdated speeds that are not capable of fulfilling the needs of students.
- Latency: Outdated delivery methods result in extremely high latency of over 2,000 milliseconds. This delay makes it impossible for students to have an efficient lesson streaming experience. Students without access to this method of remote learning are at a disadvantage compared to students that can receive a more interactive and engaging educational experience.
- Cost: The existing delivery options are subject to much higher costs in comparison to other broadband delivery methods that this bill could facilitate. Many low-income populations are therefore left with no options for broadband access.

The lack of quality broadband in some regions of Ohio, especially in rural areas, is often due to a low return on investment on infrastructure for broadband providers. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, it can cost providers over \$10,000 to run a mile of cable. While the \$20 million investment is a fantastic start, we encourage the committee to consider allocating further resources to this initiative to maximize the number of Ohioans that can utilize the benefits of broadband access.

The benefits of expanding broadband coverage through SB 8 include:

- Education: Students will be able to utilize effective methods of remote learning. With access to the broadband tiers outlined in SB 8, students can utilize lesson streaming, synchronous video classes, interactive engaging content, and more.
- Economic: Access to reliable broadband would facilitate economic development in rural regions. Previously unserved or underserved individuals would gain access to online employment options, training, and other resources. Rural businesses can utilize broadband access to promote themselves to a wider audience, network, and empower themselves with access to online resources.
- Health Care: The health of Ohioans, particularly in rural areas, will be enhanced with access to broadband. It would allow for access to telemedicine services that may not be available locally.
- Social: Ohioans in unserved or underserved regions are often cutoff from friends and family members that do not live nearby. By having access to reliable quality broadband, they can connect with loved ones using video calling software.

In conclusion, Ohio Excels believes that SB 8 is an effective start to the broadband issues highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. By providing broadband providers with program grants and enabling them to expand broadband access to underserved regions, it will promote the success of students and families throughout the state. To ensure the needs of students are represented in broadband expansion, we recommend that the Broadband Expansion Program Authority created by SB 8 include a member with background knowledge of the broadband needs for education. Whether students must continue utilizing remote learning this school year, or in the future, it is critical we invest in the infrastructure that can make this possible.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, I can be reached at LisaGray@OhioExcels.org.