

Gary Z. Lindgren, Board Chair  
Cincinnati Business Committee

Theodore Adams  
Grant Street Partners, LLC

Beverly Beery  
Beery Insurance Services, LLC

Alex R. Fischer  
Columbus Partnership

Mary Beth Martin  
The Farmer Family Foundation

Margie Wright McGowan  
Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland

Randell McShepard  
RPM International Inc.

Roland Medrano  
La Mega Media

Daniels S. Peters  
Lovett & Ruth Peters Foundation

Joseph D. Roman  
Greater Cleveland Partnership

Patrick J. Tiberi  
Ohio Business Roundtable

Lisa A. Gray  
President, Ohio Excels

## Senate Primary & Secondary Education Committee

### Testimony on House Bill 67

**Lisa A. Gray, President, Ohio Excels**  
**March 16, 2021**

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 67 (HB 67). My name is Lisa Gray, and I am the President of Ohio Excels.

Ohio Excels – a non-partisan, non-profit organization created by leaders of Ohio's business community – is 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. High school graduation requirements are a key component of confirming that our students are ready for success after high school. **This is why we have serious concerns about the changes proposed to graduation requirements in HB 67. While the disruptions caused by COVID-19 warrant some grace and flexibility, especially for this year's seniors, extending flexibility to this year's fifth grade students – as the House version of the bill does – goes too far. Instead, these students are better served by focusing on how federal resources can be used to catch students up.**

High school graduation requirements are based on the knowledge and skills that Ohio's K-12 and higher education leaders and our business community have determined are necessary for success. Students are required to demonstrate their knowledge using courses and tests. To be clear, these requirements are not arbitrary barriers designed to prevent students from earning a diploma. They are benchmarks that have been established to ensure our students are ready to graduate and that an Ohio diploma means something. Graduation requirements are often the last check on whether or not students are prepared for success after high school.

After a long debate, a broad stakeholder coalition, including Ohio Excels, came together to implement long-term graduation requirements in the last biennial budget. Students – starting with this year's sophomores – must now (1)

complete their courses, (2) demonstrate competency, and (3) show mastery using graduation seals. Students may use the required state tests to demonstrate competency, or they may use a range of non-test options, including career-focused or military options. **It is important that these graduation requirements be given a chance to work and that we avoid continuous changes.** Educators, families, and students have made it clear that they want stability and predictability.

The version of HB 67 passed by the House makes two major changes to graduation requirements:

1. For high school seniors, schools may grant a diploma if the principal – in consultation with teachers and counselors – determines the student was on track to graduate in the 2020-21 school year.
2. Students in all grades – regardless of whether or not students take an end-of-course test – may use their course grade for any course or test until the 2023-24 school year to meet the graduation requirements.

It is our understanding that the bill's sponsors believe there is an error in the course grade flexibility provision. They intended to only apply the course grade in lieu of tests for this calendar, but still for students in all grade levels. This would include a significant number of eighth grade students in the Class of 2025. While this is better than the version passed by the House, we are still opposed to this approach.

Last school year, the General Assembly provided some needed flexibility to students because of disruptions caused by COVID-19. The pandemic forced schools to close, and state tests were canceled. HB 197 provided similar flexibilities to seniors and HB 164 allowed students in all grades to use course grades to satisfy graduation requirements – an appropriate solution given no tests were available.

The course grade flexibility granted in HB 164 helped this year's freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors make progress toward graduation requirements. They can still use course grades for any course completed last school year. For example, juniors this year are likely using course grades for graduation points on the English II, Geometry, and Biology tests.

Fortunately, educators were able to prepare for this unique school year over the summer, and they made a herculean effort to educate their students. Roughly half of school districts were able to have in-person instruction all year and, as of March 10, 2021, [all but two school districts have some in-person instruction](#). State tests are also available to all students this year. In short, Ohio is in a different place now than it was one year ago. **We should make sure the flexibility granted matches what is needed – take a scalpel approach instead of a sledgehammer to the graduation requirements.**

**Ohio Excels supports granting flexibility to seniors who are on track to graduate this school year. However, we strongly oppose the second of the two proposed flexibilities – simply using course grades in lieu of state test results or other demonstrations of competency.** Courses and test results are both important. Furthermore, high school students still have the benefit of last year's HB 164 flexibilities, and **state tests are required to be given to all students this year.** Even the sponsors' intention with HB 67 extends the testing flexibility to this year's eighth grade students. This simply goes too far. We have time and significant resources to catch these students up. Furthermore, sophomores and younger are using the new graduation requirements, which include far fewer tests (just English II and Algebra I) as well as other non-test options to demonstrate competency.

Graduation requirements are designed to help students in the long run. By making sure our seniors are prepared for life after high school, we better ensure they can get and keep a job, complete their higher education program, or thrive in the military. Students who are not quite ready should get personalized supports and academic interventions to ensure they become ready. Fortunately, Ohio is receiving billions of dollars in federal funding to address those very needs. It may also be time to seriously consider how to offer a 13<sup>th</sup> year for students who need it, a concept that [many parents](#) think might be needed to catch their children up.

We have to be committed to mitigating student learning loss as soon as possible. There must be a commitment to help the graduating classes after the Class of 2021 attain the knowledge and skills they need to succeed. The new federal resources and the proposed investments in the state budget include billions in funding that should be targeted to provide supports and interventions for students with demonstrated learning loss. We know that, with the right supports and expectations, all of Ohio's students can be successful. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.