



May 6, 2021

Good afternoon Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Huffman and members of the Senate Finance Primary and Secondary Education Subcommittee. My name is Cris Gulacy-Worrel, and I am the VP of Advocacy and Development for Oakmont Education. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today on HB 110 as introduced by Representative Oelslager.

Before I begin, I would like to express my gratitude to Governor DeWine, Lieutenant Governor Husted, and the General Assembly for their continued support of educational choice and we are grateful for their and your prioritization of education overall in our state.

As many of you who have heard me testify before know, this work is extraordinarily personal to me for many reasons but especially because of my own, non-traditional and challenging high school educational experience which included multiple schools, residential facilities, juvenile detention centers, and a lot of resilience. My lived experiences and proximity to students, families and communities most impacted by educational inequity is what drives my work at Oakmont. My resiliency in the face of adversity, combined with support from leaders who had the courage to create alternative pathways for students like me are the reason I'm here testifying before you right now. This work is something that is woven into every aspect of my professional and personal life. As a result, my focus will always be on students and families, and quality educational options that meet their unique circumstances.

At Oakmont Education we operate a network of high-performing dropout recovery schools with a CTE, credentialing, and workforce readiness focus. We have schools across the state serving over 3500 students. In 2019 we graduated over 700 students that otherwise would have remained high-school dropouts.

A little bit about who we serve; our average student is 18.5 years old, reads on a 4th or 5th grade reading level and have only 20% of the classes they need to graduate. Our student population is over 95% economically disadvantaged and 25% of our students across the network are identified as exceptional. Our students have been let down time and time again, and we are fortunate that they would trust in us enough to give us another opportunity in rising to serve them and help them realize and focus their ambitions and post-secondary opportunities. Over the past year, they have been subjected to a dual-pandemic: systemic inequity and COVID-19. We believe the resiliency and drive of our students should be amplified and celebrated. In arguably one of the most difficult years of our lifetime, they have given so many in the Oakmont family hope. These are the students who will inspire, rebuild, and lead for years to come.



As I sat and listened to our Superintendent of Public Instruction testify on Tuesday, I was thankful to hear him reference the tremendous disparities in funding between traditional public districts and public charter schools. I appreciate his acknowledgement of this and am appreciative of the Department's advocacy around HB110. However, I grew increasingly concerned about his unconstructive focus on undisclosed charter stakeholders and his assertion that advocating for equitable support and treatment of charter schools and their students is somehow requesting preferential treatment, acquiescing to "community school special interests" and, I quote "chipping away at the state's progress in the sector". If we go down the rabbit hole of subjective "preferential treatment", in an effort to cast doubt or disparage public charter stakeholders, we further drive the proverbial wedge between public charters and traditional districts, something we know has a negative impact on schools and students. Something I have seen in this sector for 18 years, including when I worked at the Department myself. Furthermore, if the Superintendent of Public Instruction is going to discuss special interests in public education here in our state, he should also address the Ohio Educators Association and their special interests as well. It is my understanding that our Superintendent of Public Instruction represents all students regardless of where they are attending school in our state.

Nationally, even after the science proved that students could safely be back in schools (a sentiment which I personally and wholeheartedly agree with), we have seen the teachers' union put adult interests first. It wasn't until recently that the New York Times uncovered national teachers' union leaders coordinating with the CDC to further their adult-centered agenda. Throughout this pandemic, many public charters have been open and serving students with little to no disruption, but if the teachers' union had it their way, those options would not have existed for these students. When special interests are at play, students lose. When our students lose, we lose. I am aligned with students and families, not special interests and political agendas, after all, I am a proud, school-choice supporting Democrat and that isn't an easy thing to be. We know that traditional educational organizations have regular access to collaborative co-creation with the Department which is not the same access afforded to the public charter community, and not because we don't want or haven't tried.

To be fully transparent it often feels like we are playing a game of defense and always waiting for that next wave to crash down. The lack of organizational transparency and procedural process with regards to new guidance or rules impacting public charters has made it very difficult to focus on new and innovative ways to rise up and serve students, families, and communities.



A few examples of how the lack of collaboration and co-creation with the Department and charters would be with the lapse in Progress Testing for Dropout Recovery Students by the Department and the Operator Risk Assessment as put out by the Office of Community Schools. The Department knew for several years that the NWEA Map test contract was expiring. The lack of a test resulted in the missing of the Fall testing window and it was not until the winter that Dropout Recovery Schools were given a new test, little guidance, and just those few weeks to prepare to assess students, during a global pandemic that they were disproportionately and negatively impacted by. A more recent issue was the development of an Operator Risk Assessment that was developed within the Office of Community Schools with no stakeholder input, until stakeholders inserted themselves in the process, which was around December of 2020. This Assessment would essentially rank operators across the state based on a rubric developed by the Office of Community Schools and, as I communicated to the Department in December of 2020, could negatively impact schools and operators. When asked if this should be sent through JCARR, I was repeatedly told that it did not have to and that the Department had the authority to do this. I don't bring up these examples to "tell" on the Department, I bring up these examples so you understand that this is not equitable, this is not fair, this is not right. The way that public charter schools have been treated is not substantiated and I fear it will only get worse with time if it goes unimpeded.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee – this past year has shown us the value in educational choice. Nationwide, 17% of parents switched schools this year, and the percentage of families considering an alternative to the traditional model of education in the fall is on the rise. We've heard from students and parents from all types of schools, how their individualized choice has made all the difference for them. My own three sons are experiencing two separate districts and three types of educational delivery methods this year, including my high school senior who has completed his entire senior year online due to our family's medical risk. It is critical that we fund students equitably, regardless of where they attend school, so that we may continue to make great educational strides forward in our great state.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you so much for time and continued support of Ohio's students and their families. We look forward to the innovative and exciting ways that education will evolve and grow with the assistance of fair and equitable funding. I thank you for your time and am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Yours in Education and Liberation,

Cris Gulacy-Worrel, VP Advocacy and Development