

House Economic and Workforce Development Committee

Testimony on Senate Bill 1

Lisa Gray, Ohio Excels
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Patrick J. Tiberi, Board Chair
Ohio Business Roundtable

Theodore Adams
Barnes & Thornburg LLP

Beverly Beery
Beery Insurance Services, LLC

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Columbus Partnership

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Margie Wright-McGowan
Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland

Lisa A. Gray
President, Ohio Excels

Chair Swearingen, Vice Chair Santucci, Ranking Member Upchurch, and members of the House Economic and Workforce Development Committee, my name is Lisa Gray, and I am the President of Ohio Excels. I appreciate this opportunity to address your committee on behalf of Ohio Excels and two other state business organizations in support of Senate Bill 1: the Ohio Business Roundtable and the National Federation of Independent Businesses in Ohio. This testimony represents support from the breadth of Ohio's business community, from our smallest to largest employers. You can find descriptions of each of our organizations on the last page of my testimony.

It is a basic tenet of effective business management that any organization, whether it is in the public or private sector, must have clear lines of authority, policymaking, and fiscal responsibility in order to succeed. And those well-defined governance roles must also result in a clear line of accountability for the organization's success or failure.

Unfortunately, that can't be said about the way Ohio governs its state-level education system, where lines of authority for policymaking, budget-setting, and accountability are increasingly split among a fractured set of policymakers. It's a broken system that has not maximized service and efforts for our students, their teachers, their parents, and all of us who support Ohio schools with our taxes.

Sadly, this discontinuity is not a flaw, but a purposeful feature that has been built into our education system. So, despite the best efforts of students, parents, teachers, supportive stakeholders, and this legislature, confusion and misalignment are too often the result.

In Ohio, voters hold their governor and state legislators largely responsible for the success or failure of their schools, whether that's measured by graduation rates, reading scores, or career readiness. But too often, Ohio governors and legislators bear the public's blame whenever schools struggle, even though the current system denies them full oversight to make things better. Too much

of that authority has been shifted elsewhere to a little-known, partly elected, partly appointed body: the State Board of Education.

Ohio Excels conducted a poll last earlier this year of 1,000 registered voters in Ohio, and we asked them if they could identify their State Board of Education member – some of whom were just elected a few months ago. Out of 1,000 voters polled only four – just four – correctly selected their board member, less than one percent of voters. But they know who the governor is. And legislators work hard to ensure that voters know who represents them in Columbus.

It's long past time to reform our system. This is not an indictment of all those who currently sit on the State Board of Education or lead the Ohio Department of Education. It is about the best way to govern public education in Ohio, particularly in light of Ohio's workforce needs and the ongoing educational challenges we face.

We believe that a new education governance structure for Ohio should be about accountability, responsiveness, and relevance in today's world. It should have clear lines of authority, understanding of legislative intent, and coordination with other arms of government. It should also establish the state's top education official as a member of the governor's cabinet with an opportunity – an obligation, really – to better collaborate with other agencies on strategically aligned policies. Ultimately, the responsibility for the success of our schools lies with the governor and General Assembly.

Ohio Excels and our business partners fully support Senate Bill 1 and its efforts to move our system of education governance in a new direction. This is a plan that keeps the State Board of Education in place, but the bill focuses the board's work on the things that it does best. It also creates a critical focus on career education with the new Department of Education and Workforce (DEW). And perhaps most importantly, allows Ohio's governors, with the advice and consent of the Senate, to appoint the director of this new cabinet agency.

We do, however, have one suggestion to improve the proposed legislation. We appreciate the sponsor's goal of elevating career education in our schools. In a recent poll we conducted, 90% of public school parents believed that Ohio should place a higher priority on career education, and 80% of parents would like their children to start on a career path before they leave high school and enter college or the workforce. However, we are concerned that creating a separate division within the new agency may unintentionally silo career education at a time when it needs to be more integrated into the curriculum for all students, starting no later than 5th or 6th grade. We recommend changing the name of the career-focused division to the Division of Career Education and adding language that requires collaboration across divisions to promote the critical nature of career education for all students.

The issue of how to govern education in Ohio at the state level has been debated for decades under Democratic and Republican administrations. However, now is the time for urgency. Ohio has been without a permanent leader at the Department of Education for over a year, and given the timelines and debates occurring, it is unlikely we will have one soon. This is by no means a criticism of Interim State Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Stephanie Siddens or her team as we believe they have done a terrific job under very difficult circumstances. Not only does she and her staff deserve an answer about next steps, but more importantly, after coming off the pandemic, our students, families, and educators deserve the assurance of steadfast leadership now.

After too many years of passing responsibility through an unclear and unworkable chain of command, Ohio Excels, the Ohio Business Roundtable, and the National Federation of Independent Businesses in Ohio are convinced that it's time to head in a new direction. When our schools succeed, we all succeed. This is an opportunity that Ohio, and our children can't afford to miss. We encourage you to support the passage of Senate Bill 1.

Thank you, and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Description of Organizations Endorsing this Testimony:

Ohio Excels is a non-partisan, non-profit organization created by leaders of Ohio's business community to engage the business community more consistently and deeply in efforts to help improve educational outcomes for all Ohio students. Our focus includes early childhood, K-12, and postsecondary education. And in support of that mission, we are committed to working with the broader business community, policymakers, educators, and other community leaders to support our students, educators, and schools.

Ohio Business Roundtable is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization comprised of over 100 presidents and CEOs of Ohio's top companies, 75 of which are headquartered in the state and more than one third of which are Fortune 1000 companies. Collectively, the members employ nearly 500,000 Ohioans and generate a revenue exceeding \$1.48 trillion.

National Federation of Independent Business represents nearly 21,000 governing members. By way of background, a typical NFIB member in Ohio employs 20 or fewer and does less than \$2 million in annual receipts. Their members come from all industry types, each of the 88 counties, and range in size from sole proprietors to large operations employing hundreds.