

Testimony on House Bill 591

Thank you, Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Slaby, Ranking Member Fedor and House Education Committee members for the opportunity to provide testimony today in opposition to House Bill 591.

My name is Chad Aldis, and I am the Vice President for Ohio Policy and Advocacy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The Fordham Institute is an education-focused nonprofit that conducts research, analysis, and policy advocacy with offices in Columbus, Dayton, and Washington, D.C.

Strong, transparent school performance information is a key element to creating a high-performing educational system. It can be used to ensure excellent schools are properly recognized and rewarded for their success. It's also critical in order for local communities and (when necessary) the state to identify chronically low-performing schools where children are grade levels behind and making no discernable progress. This allows the provision of targeted resources to schools in the greatest need of improvement. For this reason, many civil rights and business groups fought to maintain reporting requirements in ESSA—the new federal education law.

It's a little odd to be standing here in front of you as an opponent of HB 591. We agree with a number of the points that Rep. Duffey has made. In a report released last December,¹ I have copies here for you, we outlined several changes that would maintain transparent information and a strong accountability system but also result in fairer, more streamlined state report cards. The key changes we recommend include reducing the number of A-F school ratings from 15 to just 6, while also striking a better balance between the state's achievement and growth measures. Updates such as these would produce more user-friendly report cards and treat schools of all poverty levels more evenhandedly. A school successfully helping catch up low-income students who enter school behind should never be deemed a failure.

Unfortunately, House Bill 591, rather than improving the current system, (you know what I'm going to say) throws the baby out with the bathwater. It replaces the present system with data dashboards displaying an array of statistical information but offering no ratings that can help provide a clearer understanding of the data. These dashboards include some fine-grained data that isn't currently available and would be an improvement; however, this data should be available as *supplemental* information and not as a *primary* way of communicating school quality to the general public.

Why shouldn't we just report the data? To answer that, refer back to Representative Duffey's PowerPoint presentation. He made a passionate case that a dashboard like that on a car is what we should be aiming for. Everyone knows looking at a speedometer, tachometer, and fuel gauge what's good and what's bad. He's right about that and that's precisely why school performance data is different. Parents and communities lack familiarity and context for education data.

¹ Fordham Institute, *Back to the Basics: A Plan to Simplify and Balance Ohio's School Report Cards*: <https://edexcellence.net/publications/back-to-the-basics-a-plan-to-simplify-and-balance-ohio%E2%80%99s-school-report-cards>.

How is a car's dashboard different? Before driving, most Ohioans have driver's education where they receive formal instruction on driving (including car gauges). They drive their car virtually every day and have driven thousands or even tens of thousands of hours in their lifetime. That makes them very familiar with the dashboard. As an aside, manufacturers have still chosen to provide context to drivers. Take a look at your tachometer, when the RPMs get to a level where engine damage could occur there are typically red numbers or lines. When your fuel approaches E, even though you know your gas is almost gone, a warning light illuminates.

Conversely, parents and communities—at most—look at their state report cards once or twice a year. To assist the public, Ohio translates dense educational data into school ratings. They provide context.

As many of us recall, Ohio used to assign ratings such as Effective, Continuous Improvement, or Academic Watch. But starting in fall 2013, Ohio has transitioned to more straightforward A-F school grades, a system used in thirteen other states.

It's important to remember why Ohio adopted this grading system in the first place, and should maintain it moving forward.

- **It's intuitive:** As simple, intuitive tools for communicating academic results, almost all of us received A–F grades during our educational experiences. No other grading system—including no grades at all, as in a dashboard system—can match A–F grades on the basis of transparency to parents and the public.
- **It's direct:** Letter grades pull no punches: An A represents hard work, high-quality, and a job well done, while an F is a red flag that improvement is needed. In comparison to other alternatives, A–F provides the most forthright approach to providing feedback. Approaches using descriptive ratings can be ambiguous. For example, Ohio formerly gave out a “Continuous Improvement” rating. To the general public, it communicated little about school quality and could even wrongly suggest that a school was improving when it could very well have had a higher rating the prior year.
- **It provides a helpful push to schools:** At the end of the day, a transparent school accountability system should incentivize schools to improve outcomes for students. Rigorous research by Princeton's Cecilia Rouse and colleagues show that student achievement in Florida schools rose as a result of tougher accountability policies, including the introduction of A–F report cards under Governor Jeb Bush. Though her analysis spans the early to mid-2000s, Florida students continue to register impressive gains on national exams as state leaders have stayed the course on accountability. Likewise, Ohio also needs to maintain a transparent system that can spur improvements and guard against complacency.

Well-designed report cards put student learning at the center and convey results in clear ways to Ohio's parents and communities.

While my comments have been focused on report cards, we have a few other concerns with changes made in HB 591.

- Student Growth: proposes the creation of a new measure; not clear at all how it would work; need to get this measure right as it's one of the few measures that doesn't correlate with socioeconomic status
- Third Grade Reading: as reworked appears to give a free pass to high wealth districts where most kids already read proficiently; isn't it most important to measure how well schools help struggling readers achieve success?
- AP/IB Scores: By reporting the average score on AP and IB exams, it could be creating an incentive to limit participation to only the very highest achieving students and making a disincentive to push kids to take more rigorous coursework; a better measure would be to report the percent of students in each school passing one or more exams
- Similar School Comparisons: While conceptually fine to compare similar schools, special care needs to be taken not to lower expectations for some students based upon geography or demographics; high poverty rural and urban students want to go to college and/or get good jobs just like low-poverty suburban students
- CTE Report Card: appears to preclude reporting on the percent of students who pass state assessments; if accurate, this is an extraordinarily bad message that suggests that CTE students don't also need to have solid reading and math skills to go along with technical competencies
- Students not Taking State Assessments: eliminates provision in current law that a student not taking a state assessment receives zero points (out of 5) for purposes of computing the performance index score; while common sense on its face, it could create an incentive for schools to counsel struggling students not to take state assessments; if it became common place, could increase likelihood that Ohio fails to meet requirement in federal law for 95 percent of students to take the state assessment

With achievement in Ohio barely inching upwards, HB 591 makes some changes to law that would potentially negatively impact Ohio's most disadvantaged students. Moreover, it would abandon a grading system that candidly depicts educational performance and offers the best chance of focusing our attention and resources on increasing student learning.

We agree that there is room to improve Ohio's report cards. We need to strike a better balance between overall student achievement and student academic growth. We also need to ensure school information gives parents valuable information that they can use in choosing a school for their children. On this count, lawmakers have work ahead to revamp the state report card system. Unfortunately, HB 591 goes too far the other direction in its effort to improve Ohio's reporting mechanisms.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.