**Statement to the Senate Education Committee in favor of Senate Bill 39**

Chair Lehner, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Education Committee:

I am sharing this written testimony in favor of Senate Bill 39 because I believe more accountability is needed for e-schools in Ohio. I have been in education for the past 14 years as a high school teacher, part-time college faculty, and now as an Assistant Professor at Southern Utah University. From November 2013 to November 2014, I worked as a high school advisor for Ohio Virtual Academy (OHVA hereafter). In addition to my various teaching and educational experiences, much of my doctoral level research has focused on Ohio’s charter and virtual/e-schools.

Upon accepting the position at OHVA, I did not hold any concrete opinions about virtual schools and their operation. I believed at the time that virtual schools could be excellent opportunities for students who were unable to attend their local public schools for various reasons. After working in the school for a year, my opinions drastically changed. As an advisor, my position required me to manage a caseload of students in order to track attendance, check grades, and keep open lines of communication with the family. Advisors were required to check student attendance logs weekly to make sure families were logging in the required hours per week. If there was a discrepancy and hours were missing, I contacted the family to alert them of the missing hours and, if the student had not completed those hours in the system, discuss a plan to make up hours and complete work that was missing. If the hours did not get entered, once the student was missing 25 hours of attendance, I initiated the truancy process by filling out a report and sending it to the truancy officer and others who oversaw the truancy process. Once the student was missing 105 hours, as the advisor, I would request the student be withdrawn for truancy. Again, once initiating this process, the truancy officer and other individuals processed it.

Shortly before leaving the school in November 2014, there were 487 K-12th grade students who had not yet logged attendance hours, and only 89 of those students were currently in the truancy reporting system after 11 weeks of school. There were also 1,826 students who were missing 25 or more hours of attendance, and of those students, only 594 had begun the truancy process, amounting to 19% of OHVA students who were eligible for the truancy process. These numbers also assume that proper truancy reporting was followed and that families did not alter attendance hours to avoid truancy charges. During my year working in the school, I found both of these things to be true at various times.

Despite changes to their reporting process or to the attendance policy that may have been made at OHVA and similar schools recently, I believe e-schools should be required to *provide* education to each of their students that totals the state-imposed 920 hours. All of Ohio’s public school students who attend a traditional public school are required to be in classrooms with their teachers for 920 hours each year, so e-school students should be held to the same standard. For this to occur in a way that can be measured, all 920 hours should be spent in the online classroom platform, which is not currently happening. OHVA’s 2016-2017 Parent Handbook states:

“Most K-5 Learning Coaches and students spend 50% of their day online and the rest of their time working off line in workbooks, printed lessons, or other related activities. Middle school students and Learning Coaches may spend between 60% and 70% of their time on their computers, while high school students will spend between 75% and 85% online. Attendance documentation of online and offline work is required by OHVA parents. Submission of student work samples is required to demonstrate consistent engagement, and will vary by grade” (p. 3).

Traditional public schools cannot provide 460 hours of instruction for grades K-5, 644 hours of instruction in middle schools, and 782 hours of instruction at the high school level and make up the remaining hours with homework. Virtual schools, who academically perform at a much lower level than the majority of public schools in Ohio, should not be allowed to loosely interpret the current attendance policies.

Senate Bill 39 would close this gap and provide greater accountability for virtual schools. If passed, the bill requires the Ohio Department of Education to be notified of truancy and attendance figures. This greater accountability places pressure on the virtual schools and their sponsors to maintain correct attendance records and uphold state policy. These proposed requirements only serve to benefit the students and families in virtual schools. Students who are not attending class are not learning to their full potential, and schools are required to make sure students are in attendance daily. Traditional public schools take attendance every morning, and in high schools, each class period. When students attend their classes, the teachers work to keep them engaged throughout the lesson through constant interaction and face-to-face engagement that cannot be replicated in an online classroom despite any technology that may be used. A 2015 study by the Stanford Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found virtual school students lost 72 days of learning, on average, in reading, and lost 180 days of learning in math. Low attendance could contribute to this loss of learning.

Virtual schools also need to have greater transparency in order for the general public to better understand the structures of such schools and their operation. Virtual school board meetings should be live-streamed after appropriate notice has been provided statewide in the cities the virtual school students and their families reside. Parents and the general public have a right to be able to attend (in person or virtually) each board meeting, just as if they were attending a board meeting in their local traditional public school district. Virtual school advertisements, which have been paid for using taxpayer money funneled from local school districts, should contain the most recent state report card grades. Taxpayers deserve to understand what their money is being used for. In a traditional district, taxpayers have a better understanding of what their taxes are being used for as they see building improvements happen, hear about new teachers being hired, or see the new textbooks and curriculum coming home in their child’s backpack each day. Finally, the state report cards for each virtual school in the state should contain an area that indicates the school’s mobility rate. While mobility rates are not an issue solely for virtual schools, the mobility rates remain higher for virtual schools than many of the traditional public school districts.

My final point refers to the funding component of SB 39. For the past 17 years, since the inception of ECOT in 2000, virtual schools have siphoned money from local school districts. While supporters of virtual schools may claim that only state funds are transferred from traditional public school districts to the virtual schools as the money “follows the student,” many Ohio school districts are subsidizing virtual schools with a portion of local taxpayer money. In my hometown of Napoleon, the per-pupil funding amount is $4,205; however, the per-pupil funding amount for ECOT and OHVA is slightly above $7000. Where does that remaining $2,795 come from? According to The Ohio Charter School Accountability Project, out of the $237,539 transferred to charter schools (3 of 4 being virtual schools), $99,562 was through local taxpayer subsidy. Napoleon Area City taxpayers have been subsidizing virtual schools who have consistently demonstrated lower academic achievement and graduation rates than their local district.

I urge you to pass Senate Bill 39 to better serve the students and families who seek out this type of education. All students in the state of Ohio are entitled to a quality education. I believe it is our duty to ensure the proper policies are in place to ensure this for all children. It is also important that taxpayers understand the structure, operation, and funding of virtual schools in the state of Ohio.

Chair Lehner and members of the committee-- thank you again for the opportunity to provide written testimony in favor of Senate Bill 39.