

## House Primary & Secondary Education Committee

### Testimony on Sub. House Bill 229

**Kevin Duff, Ohio Excels**

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Chair Manning, Vice Chair Bird, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Substitute Senate Bill 229 (SB 229). My name is Kevin Duff, and I am the Vice President of Policy and Research at Ohio Excels. We are a non-partisan, non-profit organization created by leaders of Ohio's business community who are 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.

I am here today on behalf of Ohio Excels and our partners in the business community, including the Ohio Business Roundtable and NFIB-Ohio, to express our concern about the substitute bill's changes to the Third Grade Reading Guarantee and to highlight the urgent need to support our youngest readers.

We believe there is no more significant benchmark in education than ensuring students are proficient readers before they leave elementary school. According to the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#), students who do not read proficiently by the third grade are four times more likely to leave high school without a diploma compared to proficient readers. If the student is economically disadvantaged, the student is actually six times more likely to not graduate. Research by the [Ohio Department of Education](#) found that students who are proficient in reading by third grade were five times more likely to be college and career ready. If we are going to shrink the skills gap in Ohio and secure the future of our children and the economy of the state, we need all of our students to graduate ready to succeed.

We also know that COVID-19 has disrupted the lives of educators and students. We are grateful for the educators dedicated to making the last two school years work for students. We know it has not been easy, and we appreciate those that have gone above and beyond, both inside and outside of the classroom, to ensure that our students are receiving the support they need.

However, Ohio Excels and our business partners are seriously alarmed at the reading proficiency rates we saw on the recent state report cards. A quarter of school districts had fewer than 50% of their students score proficient on the state's English Language Arts assessment. Ten Ohio school districts had fewer than 20% of their students score proficient, and one had as few as 10.1% score as proficient.

We know lower scores are a consequence of the pandemic, but we also know that we have been struggling to support our young readers even prior to the pandemic. Regardless of the reason, these low proficiency rates are shocking and present a challenge now and for the future. We can delay policy consequences for students now, but schools must go above and beyond to catch students up. The expectations of colleges, employers, and the military will remain high and likely grow. We have to act immediately to begin getting our students back on track.

While we support providing grace and flexibility to schools in how we implement the Third Grade Reading Guarantee given the pandemic's disruptions, we are concerned that the changes in the substitute bill do not reflect the urgent need to get all students reading at grade level. Requiring the notification of parents and remediation plans for these fourth grade students does not go far enough. We are recommending the following amendments:

1. Require schools to **give parents the opportunities to be involved** in the development of the student's reading plan and require the plan's interventions **begin immediately**.
2. Require schools, within these reading plans, to have **interventions that go above and beyond** their typical fourth grade reading curriculum to help catch students up, either through more instructional time, outside tutoring, or other supports.
3. Require schools to **continuing administering reading diagnostics** until they reach grade level in reading.
4. Require districts to **report which students have been promoted** using the bill's flexibility this school year and the previous two school years to the state.
5. Require the Ohio Department of Education to annually **report on the progress of these students** as they develop reading skills and reach other academic milestones based on state assessment results.

Bringing students up to grade level in reading, will not be an easy task. Fortunately, Ohio's schools have received billions in federal funding over the past two years dedicated to catching students up. These dollars, coupled with existing state and federal investments, allow our schools to provide interventions and supports that may not have been possible until now.

Ohio must commit itself to providing the most robust and targeted supports to our children. They deserve nothing less. Their future, and the future of our state, depends on it. Ohio Excels and our business community partners urge you to consider adding the amendments I described to the final version of SB 229. Thank you again for the opportunity to share our testimony, and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.