

Before the Ohio House Economic and
Workforce Development Committee
Written Proponent Testimony on SB 1
Harry Snyder, President/CEO, Great Oaks Career
Campuses March 28, 2023

Preliminary statement

Great Oaks Career Campuses and other Ohio career-technical schools have become increasingly essential to the Ohio economy. As unemployment rates remain at record lows, technology advances, and available jobs become increasingly technical, the gap between the skills of potential employees and the needs of employers widens almost daily.

Being able to earn professional certifications & credentials as well as college credit in high school gives Ohio students a head start in the world of work. But career-technical centers must be able to provide up-to-date equipment and current technology for students to learn on, and career centers must be able to meet the growing demand from students of all ability levels. The proposed Department of Education and Workforce (DEW) should match the evolving reality for the quickly changing needs of Ohio businesses, career-technical schools, students, and communities we serve.

Testimony

Chairman Swearingen, Vice Chair Santucci, Ranking Member Upchurch, and members of the Ohio House Economic and Workforce Development Committee, thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts on Senate Bill 1. My name is Harry Snyder, and I am President/CEO of Great Oaks Career Campuses in southwest Ohio. I submit this testimony in support of Senate Bill 1, and specifically the proposed recalibration of the Department of Education to the Department of Education and Workforce (DEW)—with a Division focused exclusively on Career-Technical Education.

This change will expedite bureaucracy efficiency and help Career Technical Education (CTE) adopt faster to the quickly evolving labor force needs of business. Presently, the Ohio Department of Education's (ODE) hard working office of Career Tech has layers of 'decision makers' between them and the State Superintendent. This bill addresses the decision-making process in an effort to streamline structural improvements to Ohio's education system and otherwise elevate CTE within the Governor's Cabinet and Executive Workforce Board.

Great Oaks serves 36 school districts covering 2,200 square miles. Students may attend any of our four campuses and we also have satellite programs in 29 high schools across our region. About one out of every four high school students attends a Great Oaks program, either on campus or at their high school. In school year 2021-22, Great Oaks was one of the largest Career Technical schools in Ohio and the country, serving more than 4,100 FTE's.

Great Oaks students have the chance to earn professional certifications or licenses by the time they finish high school. Our graduates may have their Federal Aviation Administration airframe mechanic certification. They may be qualified in robotics or become licensed practical nurses. Our students can become career-ready in more than 30 fields, and earn college credit while doing so.

Great Oaks students are also great kids working for a better future. I think about Trent, a recent graduate who dealt with family addiction issues and homelessness throughout his young life. He persevered, excelled, and was a speaker at his senior ceremony. In fact, his Dean even chose him to travel with us to Washington DC to represent Great Oaks. Today, Trent is self-sufficient, serves as a nurse, and focuses on helping others through challenging times much like himself.

To be relevant in the regional economy, Great Oaks must continually examine the programs we offer. Old, outdated programs are set aside and new programs that meet changing demands begin. For instance, programs in years past that taught stenography or mechanical drafting have closed, and new programs in robotics, coding, and surgical technology (as well as others) have taken their place.

At Great Oaks, we must provide our students with experiences that prepare them for the future. For existing programs that often means investing in equipment and technology even before business and industry does. For example, our welding program has served students for years and we have recently added plasma cutters to each of our welding labs. That's because students will need to gain experience with them in order to be more widely employable.

The Ohio model of career-technical education was ahead of its time when it began. And, for over 50 years it has been held up around the country as a model of success.

Although education professionals and employers have seen career-tech or vocational schools as critical component of assuring a vibrant workforce, there has long been a stigma about attending. Fortunately, that has changed—and our enrollment and surveys show that. In fact, a 2017 nationwide survey showed that 92% believe that career-technical education is more important than ever.

According to a survey released by the Charles Koch Foundation and the SkillUp Coalition, more than half of Americans under 40 believe they will need to acquire new skills to advance their careers. Moreover, the same survey found fifty-eight percent of Generation Z respondents and just over 50 percent of Millennials said they will need additional training to reach their career goals. Likewise, thirty-four percent of all respondents believe they will need to acquire new skills in the future. Finally, of those individuals who are looking to upskill, 84 percent will seek new training within three years' time.

The State of Ohio has also recognized the value of career awareness and exposure at earlier ages. Great Oaks has embraced that effort by providing a full-time staff member to assist our 36 partner districts in developing career activities for elementary and middle school students.

All of that means that more students are depending on Great Oaks and other career-technical schools. On-campus enrollment has grown more than 10% in the past five years, and satellite program enrollment has grown even faster. Again, the time in history is ripe to continue to move Career Technical Education forward and elevate their importance in the education field, SB 1 is a step forward.