



Dr. Kirk Blair, State 4-H Leader and Assistant Director, OSU Extension
College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Good morning, Chair Bird, Vice Chair Fowler-Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee. My name is Kirk Blair, and I serve as the Assistant Director for 4-H Youth Development and State 4-H Leader in Ohio State University Extension, within the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences (CFAES).

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to offer proponent testimony for House Bill 135 on behalf of CFAES at The Ohio State University, which includes OSU Extension, and Ohio 4-H. HB 135 would require school districts to grant students excused absences from school for participation in 4-H and FFA programs and activities -- activities that serve as valuable opportunities for experiential and skills-based learning for our youth, and are critical to building Ohio's future workforce in the food, agricultural, and natural resource sectors.

4-H is the largest youth development organization in the nation, empowering nearly six million young people with the skills to lead for a lifetime. It is delivered across the country through land-grant universities and Cooperative Extension. Ohio is the birthplace of 4-H. Although it is now in all fifty states and more than eighty countries, 4-H was first organized by A.B. Graham in 1902 in Clark County, Ohio. The organization was originally called the "Boys and Girl's Agricultural Club," and its focus was on teaching youth about the environment, agriculture, and domestic sciences. Graham soon partnered with The Ohio State University, and the club spread to other Ohio counties. The Ohio State University hired Graham as its first director of Extension, years before the passage of the Smith Lever Act in 1914 that established the Cooperative Extension system nationwide. To this day, Ohio 4-H is still delivered by OSU Extension within the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences at Ohio State. Despite its growth and expansion to non-farming communities, Graham's basic aim for 4-H remains the same; it is meant to help the education and "development of youth as individuals and as responsible, productive members of the community in which they live."

In 2022, 131,102 youth across Ohio participated in 4-H community clubs, but also in camps, special interest (or SPIN) clubs, and through in-school and after school programming. Additionally, 13,598 adults volunteered their time to serve as 4-H club advisors, instructors, advisory committee members, and mentors in 2022. Today, with the help of adult volunteers, 4-H youth in Ohio still learn about natural resources, food and nutrition, animal sciences, and agriculture. However, 4-H has expanded since the days of A.B. Graham to include learning opportunities in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), leadership and personal development, and the exploration of pathways toward future careers. We consider 4-H to be students' first class at Ohio State.

Often, the highlight of the year for 4-H members is the county fair, where they exhibit projects that they have worked so hard on, from showing livestock, to creative writing and gardening, to STEM projects like rocketry, and receive invaluable feedback and mentorship. Simply put: the fair culminates a year of education. Approximately forty county and independent fairs across the state - roughly half of all fairs - take place from mid-August through the beginning of October when school is back in session. Importantly, House Bill 135 would allow 4-H members to participate in their county fairs and other 4-H educational activities without the worry of being penalized for missing school.

In order to reinforce the tenets of personal responsibility that 4-H strives to instill in youth, we would respectively suggest alternative language to the bill, that places primary responsibility with the 4-Her and their parents of notifying the school of a 4-H-excused absence. 4-H educators could also provide confirmation of this planned absence if and when contacted by the school for further verification. This approach would replace the expectation that 4-H educators submit written documentation to each school in their county for each 4-H member seeking an excused absence, as is currently written. We would be happy to work with the bill's sponsors and the committee to explore what alternative options for verifying 4-H activities could be made in the bill.

In the years since 1902, 4-H has grown and expanded to new audiences and to include new topics, while continuing to prepare youth to be responsible, productive, members of the workforce and their communities. As the birthplace of 4-H, it is important that Ohio continues to allow youth to participate in these educational pursuits. We at OSU Extension 4-H Youth Development in The Ohio State University's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences greatly appreciate the opportunity to offer interested party testimony on House Bill 135.