Testimony on House Bill 472 – Mid-Biennium Review
March 12, 2014

Ohio House Ways and Means Committee
Representative Jeff McClain, Chair

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Ohio Department of Education

Chairman McClain, Vice-Chair Scherer, Ranking Member Letson, and members of the Ohio House Ways and Means Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the Executive version of House Bill 472, the mid-biennium review.

INTRODUCTION

I am Dr. Richard Ross, the Superintendent of Public Instruction and head of the Ohio Department of Education. I have led the department over the last year as we've implemented many changes to help Ohio's boys and girls.

Together, with support from our partners in the legislature, we have made education a key priority to help improve results in Ohio's classrooms and better educate our children. Over the past two years, we have championed initiatives to strengthen our schools, including the Third Grade Reading Guarantee, Cleveland and Columbus school plans, the A-to-F Report Card and created a $250 million Straight A Fund to spur educational innovation.

In the past, school funding has been a patchwork of solutions. We are trying to resolve those by keeping focused on what is best for the boys and girls of Ohio, not buildings. The governor's Achievement Everywhere Plan has the largest increase in school funding in a decade. It allocated $1.6 billion in new state funds for the next two fiscal years, putting more dollars in the classroom in ways that help teachers respond to each student's unique learning needs. With a total investment of $17.5 billion in our schools this biennium, Ohio is spending a record amount of money. Anyone saying were not spending an enormous amount of money is not paying attention.

I have been working to better educate Ohio's children for more than 40 years, serving as a teacher, principal and school district superintendent. But before my career began, I was

fortunate to receive a good education. If you are sitting here today, you were fortunate too. But many kids are not so lucky.

Many of them are actually smart kids – their futures could have been so bright. But they fell victim to education systems that didn't recognize their unique gifts, that didn't expect them to do great things, and that moved them along without the skills – such as early reading – that they needed to be successful.

Do you know what happens to students like that? I do. They disappear. It's not dramatic, and there is no fanfare. They just fade from the front row to the back; from good attendance to bad. Until one day, they are just gone. There is a celebration when students graduate, but there is barely a whisper when they disappear/ drop out of school.

24,000 students disappeared from Ohio's schools last year. This is simply unacceptable.

There are mountains of research from that tell us what happens next. Ohioans that do not have a high school diploma are twice as likely to live in poverty compared to those who do have a high school diploma. Incarceration rates for young dropouts are 63 times higher than rates for college graduates. Young adults that have dropped out of school are far more likely to abuse drugs, alcohol and tobacco.

Each student that drops out of school impacts the community as well, costing taxpayers an average of $292,000 over a lifetime.

Dropouts can't even enter in the military these days. In my generation, the military gave dropouts or high school grads a technical education that often fueled a lifelong career. That option isn't available today. We simply have to keep these students in school.

I believe the Third Grade Reading Guarantee is the key to keeping students in school long-term. There were 27,000 students reading below grade level in 2011-2012. In 2012-2013, 24,000 students dropped out of school. The similarity in these numbers is not a coincidence. Research has shown that students who don't read proficiently by the third grade are four times more likely to drop out of school, and 60 percent of students who do drop out were not able to read proficiently in third grade.

With the Third Grade Reading Guarantee, schools will identify students reading below grade level, create an improvement plan with each student's parents and teacher, and give each student the individual help they need. These are proven strategies.

It is critical that our students be able to read by the third grade. There will be several chances to show they are ready, but now they won't move on to the fourth grade unless they are ready. We know what happens when they move on without being able to read – they drop out of school. I am convinced the Third Grade Reading Guarantee will keep students in school in the long run. However, its impact on students dropping out in the upper grades will take some time.

We need to act right now for students who are at risk of leaving school today. The proposals in HB 472 will create a new focus on students that are on the edge of leaving school. It will help find these students, get them the help they need, offer them new pathways to a diploma and make their education more meaningful so that each student *wants* to stay in school.

PREVENTING DROPOUTS

To help schools find students that are at risk of dropping out, the Department of Education will work with experts in the field to create a tool that local schools can use to identify a student who is at risk of dropping out, and show *why* they are at risk. The tool, which we'll call an early warning system, will use research-based methods of identifying students at risk. I want to be clear: no data put into this system will be sent to the state or federal government. The system will be used by local educators, using local data, to make local decisions on what is best for their students.

If a student is found to be at risk of dropping out, the teacher, counselor, parents or guardian, and student will sit down to discuss what might be going wrong and how they might fix it. Bringing the student's parents in to discuss the importance of a diploma and their child's education, alone, could make an impact. A majority of dropouts' parents were not aware of their child's struggles in attendance and grades, or that they were about to leave school.

Once the team comes up with a plan for the student, he or she can try a new pathway or a mixture of pathways or receive some other help – whatever is best for the student. The plan will also include additional advising and guidance.

This plan should empower the student. It should renew their interest in education. 70 percent of students who dropped out of school say they were confident that if they had tried, they could have succeeded in school.

I suspect that many students in Ohio struggle to see how what they are learning matters to them. Research has shown that half of students who have dropped out of school say

they left because their classes were not interesting. They said that what they were learning wasn't relevant to them or their future.

CAREER CONNECTIONS

In 2012, Governor Kasich and the General Assembly directed the department to create a set of voluntary resources called Career Connections. Schools are able to use these Career Connections to create a link between what students are learning now and a future career by using age-appropriate strategies.

For example, a teacher could reference in a fifth grade math lesson a real career that uses a skill the students are learning that day. This could be a scientist who needs to know how to convert measurements. Students could complete exercises as if they are working in the career. A student that is interested in learning more about that career could be connected with a local scientist or visit the scientist's workplace.

Career Connections are supported by OhioMeansJobs.com, the state's job-services website. Together with the Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation and the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services, we've created a student section, or "youth portal" on OhioMeansJobs that will allow youth to look at career options right from the computer or smartphone. The youth portal will have age-appropriate career planning tools and a virtual menu of career opportunities that will show students what jobs are available, what they pay, and what it takes to get the jobs. Teachers and advisors can use these resources as they create the student's plan. As part of their plans, school districts should also consider creating more pathways to a diploma for students.

PATHWAYS TO A DIPLOMA

The traditional path through school does not always work for every student. There are three other, broadly defined pathways outlined in this proposal. Students have different goals or need different ways to learn, and there should be different pathways to meet their needs.

Dropout Prevention and Recovery Program

First, for students at risk of quitting school, a dropout prevention and recovery program may be the best choice. These alternative programs have flexible schedules and online options so students can learn on their own schedules. These programs also award credit using competency-based education, which will let the students move toward a diploma at their own pace.

Students in these programs often need extra help, even outside of school. This bill will strengthen these programs by requiring a partnership with other local organizations that

could help their students. These organizations could include job training, post-secondary, health, social service, and nonprofit organizations. This proposal doesn't require that any specific wraparound service be offered, but it does make sure that schools and agencies work together for the benefit of struggling students.

Alternate Pathway
Second, using the flexibility granted in this proposal, school districts could offer their students unique pathways to a diploma, almost like a high school major. A school district could have an arts pathway for a student pursing the fine arts. HB 472 extends a provision that would allow the student to be exempt from taking Algebra II, a specific course not aligned to the student's career goals. A school district could have a pathway that focuses on STEM subjects. Instead of taking four years of a foreign language, students could learn a programming language or continue to advance in mathematics. In this proposal, school districts will have the flexibility to customize their alternative pathways to meet their students' needs.

Career-Technical Education
Lastly, an excellent, and underutilized, pathway for all students is career-technical education. Unfortunately, many people have an image of a shop class when they think of career tech. That's old thinking. Today, career-tech centers lead the way with technical training programs that prepare students for college and valuable industry skills such as information technology, health sciences, tourism, hospitality and finances. Let's use this opportunity to enlighten folks about the career tech of today. These programs allow students to pursue their passions and succeed in work they find relevant.

Students who want to be engineers can get a head start on their college degrees in a hands-on environment. Students interested in nursing can learn about biology and chemistry in the context of their interests. Many students can even earn post-secondary credit while in a career-tech program.

In fact, career-technical programs are so beneficial that HB 472 includes provisions to extend access to these programs down to seventh grade, instead of just high school. This will give more Ohio students a jumpstart on their career education. Most students begin career-tech programs in their junior year. The earlier we engage students, the better chance we have of preventing them from dropping out.

We do acknowledge that not all program areas have appropriate material to extend their reach to the seventh grade at this time, and not all career-tech facilities are ready to offer more courses. School districts will be permitted to opt-out of the extension if they choose,

so long as they publicly explain their reasons for not giving students access to these education options.

These pathways are not prescribed in detail, and they are not permanent. If a student takes career-technical courses in seventh grade, that student does not have to continue on that path forever. If an arts student in eleventh grade decides to pursue a pre-apprenticeship program and receive specialized training at a worksite, there is nothing to stand in that student's way. The pathway must adjust as the student's needs and interests change.

School District Policy

There are a lot of pieces to the dropout puzzle and it is easy to lose track of all the options. This is why we are asking every school district to create a career-advising policy and make it available to their students' parents and the public. The provisions in HB 472 don't tell schools what they must do in the advising policy. Instead, the proposal just has school districts bring the pieces together for their students, parents, and community, based on what the district feels is best for its students.

For example, the policy must make it clear what pathways to a diploma are available to students in the school district. School districts will be required to make this policy as public as possible so that parents and the community know what their schools are doing and how they might help.

COMMUNITY CONNECTORS

To accomplish the goal of keeping students in school, the community has to get involved. I believe that communities are willing to help our students, but they don't always know how. As part of the proposal to prevent dropouts, we are creating a new initiative called Community Connectors. This initiative will support the best ideas in our state for bringing together schools, parents, community organizations, faith-based groups, business leaders, and, of course, our students, in mentoring efforts based on proven practices.

We know that mentoring programs are effective. For example, studies show that 76 percent of at-risk young adults who had a mentor aspire to enroll in and graduate from college. This is compared to 56 percent of at-risk young adults who had no mentor.

There are some effective mentoring programs already in our schools. For example, the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative brings more than 1,700 volunteers and 100 businesses together to focus on student mentoring and tutoring, college readiness and success, dropout prevention, and career preparation. As a result, 96 percent of seniors mentored in the collaborative graduate from high school.

However, these programs do not reach all the students we need to help. That's why Community Connectors will grant a total of $10 million dollars to the best, most sustainable programs that will help give more Ohio students access to role models who can help motivate and inspire them, as well as help them develop skills that lead to success in school and the workplace.

These grants will be targeted to school districts with high poverty and low graduation rates. The initiative will also prioritize proven mentoring practices, such as long-term programs that build close, one-on-one relationships and programs that integrate other social service providers.

To show we are serious about involving the community, the lead applicants for this initiative must be community organizations partnering with a school district. To show we are serious about sustainability, each applicant will be asked to raise funds locally for the grant. The initiative will provide $3 for every $1 raised to help kick start the program.

Local partnerships can create sustainable programs. We've already seen this with our Straight A Fund. The Straight A Fund also seeks out sustainable proposals by local partnerships that are trying to raise student achievement, lower costs, and target more dollars to the classroom.

There was an overwhelming response to the first round of the Straight A Fund grants. The applicants together requested nearly $868 million. The fund is now beginning its second round of applications, and feedback on the program has been very positive.

We expect the Community Connectors initiative to have the same success. Together we can keep our most at-risk students in school, increase the number that go on to college and help more students get the skills they need to succeed in Ohio's workforce.

DIPLOMAS FOR ADULTS

Far too many Ohioans do not have the skills they need for a career right now. There are about nine million adults in Ohio. One million of those adults do not have a high school diploma. These are one million lives that may not be reaching their full potential. As I mentioned earlier, income, job opportunities, and education options for adults without a high school diploma are limited. For people older than 22, there is no way to earn a traditional high school diploma. This needs to change.

HB 472 includes a pilot program that gives adults who didn't finish high school a pathway to a diploma. Instead of going back to a high school, adults can move on to community or

technical college to get a high school diploma. Once there, an adult will work toward an industry credential or certificate. When the adult completes the program and earns the credential or certificate, he or she will also receive a high school diploma. It would be our desire that these adults might even stay and pursue a two-year degree.

While a high school diploma is a critical first step, the key to getting out of poverty is a good job. These pilot programs can provide an industry credential or certificate that employers are demanding, a high school diploma, and the career advising they need to succeed.

This is currently a pilot. We need to get stakeholders together to work out some of the details of this program. The Chancellor of the Board of Regents and I will work together closely to select and support pilot sites during the 2014-2015 academic year. The proposal provides for $2.5 million in start-up money for selected programs so they can prepare for students to enroll in the 2015-2016 academic year.

Once at full strength, this diploma pathway will add to Ohio's portfolio of adult pathways to success. It serves as an excellent supplement to GED preparation options such as the Adult Basic Literacy Education (ABLE) program.

HB 59 generously provided funding for first-time GED test takers that receive career advising from a technical center. This bill will expand the use of those funds to include first-time test takers in Department of Youth Services and Department of Rehabilitation and Correction facilities. This will ensure that Ohioans who need the GED the most will continue to have access to this option.

ADDITIONAL PROPOSALS
HB 472 is a thoughtful and comprehensive plan to focus Ohio on helping prevent students from disappearing from the classroom. However, there are also proposed changes in other areas of the department's diverse responsibilities.

Flexibility for New Teachers
The bill proposes that a process be created for teachers with a resident educator license to renew that license. Currently these licenses expire after four years, and if an aspiring educator is not able to complete the residency program in that time, the educator can't earn a professional license. An educator may have a child during these four years or be called to serve in our armed forces. This proposal will better account for the many things that may disrupt an educator's way to the classroom.

Academic Distress Commissions

At the direction of the General Assembly, the Department of Education has reinvented the Local Report Card for schools and districts. The report card now uses letter grades (A-F). The report card also is presented on an interactive website that has been widely praised, locally and nationally. The website ran 200,000 reports for visitors last month alone. This transition also required a change in what triggers consequences for schools that are performing poorly. This includes the trigger for a state takeover, called an academic distress commission, for the lowest performing school districts in Ohio.

After implementing the report card and analyzing the first year of data, there are concerns that the current trigger in law is not identifying the right school districts. Academic distress commissions are intended for the lowest few school districts. We currently have two commissions – one in Youngstown and one in Lorain.

Under the current trigger, our preliminary analysis indicates that we could be creating commissions for dozens of districts over the next few years. But some of these districts are graduating more than 95 percent of their students on time. In some of these districts, 95 percent or more of their students are proficient in reading by the third grade. With such success on other academic measures, it is unlikely that these districts are truly among Ohio's worst.

Provisions in HB 472 will change the way school districts receive an academic distress commission. The new trigger will phase in a more comprehensive view of the school district's performance. The new trigger will unify the commission and improvement efforts of the state and federal government so that these groups can better coordinate their work and resources.

CONCLUSION

These changes will allow the state to focus on helping the districts that need it most. We can no longer allow these schools to fail our boys and girls. Over the past few years, we've partnered with the General Assembly to prepare students for success. Policies like the Third Grade Reading Guarantee focus on helping students early.

This proposal builds on those policies to support students as they near graduation, so we can ensure that every one of them reach a diploma. With a diploma, each Ohioan has the opportunity to earn more and better help their families stay out of poverty.

Working together, our state, schools, teachers, parents, and communities can keep our students in school and get them ready for successful lives after school.

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