

Testimony on the Education Provisions of House Bill 64, the FY16-17 Biennial Budget

Ohio Senate
Finance Subcommittee on Education
Senator Cliff Hite, Chair
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Ohio Department of Education

Chairman Hite, Vice Chair Sawyer and members of the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Education, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the K-12 education sections of House Bill 64, the Fiscal Year 2016-2017 Biennial Budget. I am Dr. Richard Ross, superintendent of public instruction and head of the Ohio Department of Education.

Throughout Gov. Kasich's first term, he has been a strong advocate of K-12 education. The governor believes, and I believe, we need to take Ohio to the next level and create more pathways and more opportunities for Ohioans to succeed. Much work already has been accomplished thanks to the governor's leadership and our work with our partners in the General Assembly. We implemented an A-F report card, the Third Grade Reading Guarantee, and a teacher and principal evaluation system. In addition, we have introduced students to the strong connections between learning and careers and have strengthened career-technical education through an appropriate accountability system that links students with real-life career experiences. All of these policies are driving needed improvements statewide. Early childhood, K-12 and higher education continue to be priorities for the governor.

Gov. Kasich's executive budget builds on the department's priorities by creating policies that provide flexibility to schools, focus on student success and create quality choices for students and families. His budget initiatives will give educators, parents and communities the resources they need to help students everywhere achieve more and more.

Department of Education Priorities

My vision for K-12 education in Ohio is to ensure that every girl and boy receives a high-quality education, can read at grade level and graduates college or job ready. To achieve these goals, we must prioritize policies and initiatives that are best for students. Department priorities include:

- Providing the basic education funding necessary to support student success and achievement;
- Offering early learning programs to promote school readiness;
- Promoting and supporting quality school choice options for all students;

- Setting expectations for what all students should know and be able to do;
- Aligning student assessments with the state's academic content standards to determine that students are meeting expectations;
- Providing focused, high-quality professional development for educators;
- Holding districts, schools, educators and students accountable for student growth and performance; and
- Initiating school improvement programs aimed at improving school learning environments, engaging parents and supporting student intervention programs.

In order to achieve these priorities, as well as the new initiatives advanced over the past several years, the executive budget recommends an increase in our operating expense line item (GRF 200321) by \$1.4 million in FY16 and \$1.7 million in FY17. Programs like the Straight A Fund and Community Connectors, and initiatives surrounding school safety, blended learning, and the Third Grade Reading Guarantee have added additional administrative costs to successfully implement. At the same time, approximately 80 fewer employees work at the department of education than just five years ago. The executive budget also increases our operating expense line item by \$1.2 million for rent expenses currently paid by the Department of Administrative Services.

Straight A Fund

In his last budget, Gov. Kasich created the Straight A Fund to create sustainable programs that help improve student achievement, increase efficiency and drive more dollars to classrooms. Too often in education, we wait for prescriptions to come to us from Washington and Columbus. We should not prescribe our way to excellence. Excellence will percolate up from the people we have at the local level. Our educators have shown excitement for this program as evidenced by the hundreds of applications we received.

In the first round of Straight A grants, 24 projects were funded representing more than 150 school districts and partners. Ohio's Straight A Fund connected principals with businesses to provide project-based learning opportunities for students. As a part of Ohio's Straight A Fund, teachers in the Ohio Appalachian Collaborative have offered 165 high school courses that give college credit to 48,000 students in 27 districts. Over the five-year grant period, 6,610 credits are expected to be offered.

In the second round of grants, our selection process was improved thanks to the General Assembly in House Bill 342. Second round applicants that showed higher cost savings were prioritized for funding, and educational service centers were allowed to be the lead applicants in consortia. In this round of Straight A grants, 40 projects were funded representing more than 200 school districts and partners. Ohio's Straight A Fund connected buses with GPS systems, students to the latest robotics technology and much more.

Ohio's Straight A fund introduced an important concept in education by requiring that funded projects be sustainable. Grantees must be financially able to maintain their projects over five years, either through program cost efficiency or by eliminating other unneeded or unsuccessful programs or processes. The department is evaluating grants to ensure they are meeting these requirements around sustainability. The department also is monitoring the direct academic impact of each project, as well as the ways in which projects may have created ripples that alter the means for delivering instruction in other areas. For example, early evidence suggests that once technology becomes available for one

intended purpose, it spurs other uses. We also have seen first-round projects replicated in the second round of grant applications.

The Straight A Fund is considered the largest education innovation fund in the nation and has helped our districts and schools implement their best reform ideas. It makes sense to continue the Straight A Fund and Gov. Kasich is doing just that by allocating \$200 million in lottery proceeds over the biennium to support two more rounds of Straight A Fund grants. I continue to believe that these innovative programs have shown early successes in increasing student engagement, helping districts find efficiencies and cost savings, and promoting collaboration across district boundaries. Because I believe in these projects, and the promising results we are seeing, I would encourage the Senate to continue to strongly support the Straight A Fund in this budget.

Community Connectors

The Community Connectors program brings businesses, faith- and value-based organizations, community nonprofits and school districts together to create mentor programs that build life skills and workforce readiness. Community Connectors emphasizes goal setting, character, personal and career-oriented skills and helps students build the grit and resilience they'll need to be successful in school and life.

We know the power that lies in community partnerships like these, and we have several successful examples across Ohio. The Cincinnati Youth Collaborative has been connecting Cincinnati area schools with business and community partners for 30 years. Collaborative volunteers mentor students who face challenges like poverty, homelessness, disciplinary problems and unstable homes. Yet, even with these risk factors, 96 percent of the seniors in the program in 2014 graduated from high school compared with just 74 percent graduating in Cincinnati Public Schools overall. Of the graduates, 88 percent went on to college, a career or enlisted in the military. Community Connectors builds on successful collaborative models like the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative and is worth our expanded investment.

The benefits of the program go beyond helping individual students. That's why the budget increases the program's support by appropriating \$30 million over the biennium and continues to match \$3 for every \$1 provided by local partners. Through these dynamic partnerships and social connectedness, Community Connectors strengthens communities and creates new pathways for civic engagement that will result in higher levels of wellbeing, health and workforce readiness for our state.

Community Connectors applications for FY15 grants were due March 6, 2015. Once applications were received, they were first reviewed by independent evaluators who read and scored each application. The Community Connectors Advisory Board has recommend finalists, and I will be announcing final selections soon. We have received overwhelming interest in the program from faith-based organizations, businesses, community nonprofits and school districts. Through additional funding in House Bill 64, Community Connectors will make a remarkable impact on the lives of students and communities in every corner of our state.

I am pleased to have several members of my senior leadership team with me today to provide you with details on other budget proposals including: a pilot program to explore competency-based education; an extension to our innovative school and district waiver program; incentives for districts who expand advanced placement and College Credit Plus opportunities for students; opportunities for adults who want to get high school diplomas; reforms to our community school laws; reductions to the time students spend taking tests; and much more.

As you can see, in his new budget, Gov. Kasich seeks to strengthen education across Ohio—because every child, in every classroom, in every school deserves a quality education. I'm happy that Gov. Kasich's education proposals for the next biennium build on the progress we've made so far and encourage us to take things to the next level. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss the budget's K-12 policy initiatives. We at the department of education look forward to working with the members of the General Assembly on these proposals. My staff and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.