



Testimony on SB 316 – April 19, 2012

Chairwoman Lehner, Ranking Minority Member Sawyer, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Ann Sheldon, and I am the executive director of the Ohio Association for Gifted Children (OAGC). My testimony today is in two parts. The first covers non-accountability related gifted issues and the second covers OAGC's analysis and concerns regarding the proposed new accountability provisions in SB316.

Non-Accountability System Issues

The last few years for gifted students have been extremely difficult. Lack of funding and district support have led to huge cuts in services. Unfortunately, even with the gifted maintenance of effort provision included in HB153, gifted services and staffing have been greatly reduced over the past year. In order to support gifted students, OAGC would like the committee to consider the following changes to SB316.

- 1. Remove the provision that allows district administrators to serve as gifted coordinators** – Despite the Ohio Senate removal of this provision in HB153, it was reinserted in the conference committee. Frankly, this provision is destroying the already diminished gifted infrastructure that exists in Ohio's districts. Gifted coordinators typically serve as the foundation and lifeline for gifted services and children in districts where few individuals have any training about how to meet the needs of gifted students. This new provision has greatly weakened the role of gifted coordinator and has broken down the foundation of gifted support overall. Even though administrators under the provision are required to have appropriate gifted licensure, many principals, curriculum coordinators, and counselors are now inappropriately tacking on "gifted coordinator" as one of their titles regardless of their credentials. Districts are not required to have a gifted coordinator, but if they do employ or contract the services of one, parents should be assured that this individual actually has the required training to make informed educational decisions for their children.
- 2. Develop regional gifted schools across the state** – This is an idea that was gaining support toward the end of HB153 deliberations, but time ran out before the concept could be fully developed. As districts are less able to provide gifted services, it makes sense that regional opportunities for gifted schools should be developed to ensure that gifted students have some access to services. If the future of education lies in shared services, gifted regional schools are an idea whose time has come.
- 3. Allow for gifted community schools in all districts** – The Ohio Senate actually inserted this provision in HB153. It was removed in the conference committee. At a time when districts are reducing gifted services at a rapid pace, it seems appropriate to allow community schools for this population to open in areas outside of challenged districts.
- 4. Develop state cut scores on nationally accepted assessments** – This would allow gifted and other high achieving students to test out of course content without having to pay districts to do so under the credit flexibility policy.

5. **Adjust the assessment system** to allow students to take Ohio Achievement Assessments and the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) when they are ready to take them so they can move on. Students in STEM schools are already allowed early access to the OGT. Students in non-STEM schools should have the same access.
6. **Clarify that districts must award students appropriate high school credit for TAG (Transfer Assurance Guide) approved courses in the PSEO (Post Secondary Enrollment Options) program and that courses under dual enrollment need to be TAG approved courses.** -- Some districts do not award the same high school credit for courses taken under PSEO as they do for dual enrollment. There seems to be a conflict of interest in some district policies that discourage PSEO participation, which is free to students under state law, while encouraging students to take courses for fees under dual enrollment, for which students may or may not receive college credit.
7. **Encourage students to finish high school courses early** by embracing some of the reform movements in other states that allow funding to flow to early graduates for post secondary work.

Accountability Issues

While OAGC has several general recommendations regarding the new accountability provisions in SB316, the most important recommendations are to weight the scores of students who are accelerated and to include a gifted sub-group in the appropriate identification areas. This will ensure that districts are accountable for the academic growth of this student population as they are for other student sub-groups. Beyond these gifted-specific recommendations, I would like to share OAGC's overall analysis of education accountability in Ohio.

Last November, OAGC released a report (Grading on a Curve: The Illusion of Excellence in Ohio's Schools) detailing our analysis of Ohio's accountability system especially with regard to the proliferation of excellent-rated school districts. The purpose of the report was to evaluate the effectiveness of the accountability system and to question whether it is adequate to ensure that Ohio's children will be prepared as the state moves toward college- and career-ready standards. Whether we acknowledge it or not, our accountability system drives district behavior by rewarding or failing to reward various metrics. We concluded in our report that the current district rating system was misleading, at best. There truly are some excellent districts in Ohio. But because our standards are so low and our rating system so convoluted, it is impossible to differentiate between the excellent and mediocre districts that are branded with the same label. The specific issues we identified in the current system were:

1. **Very low standards for excellence** that only served to confuse the public and which caused many districts with very low levels of student performance on college- and career-readiness to be labeled the same as districts with very high levels.
2. **Extremely low cut scores** on the current Ohio Achievement Assessments (OAAs) and Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) even at the accelerated and advanced levels.
3. **Low student proficiency passage rates** to meet performance indicators and lack of incentive for districts to continue to improve student passage rates.
4. **A disconnect between Ohio assessments and national as well as international assessments.**

5. **Lack of high quality metrics** (such as college remediation rates, performance on ACT and Advanced Placement tests, services to gifted students, and numbers of students qualifying for diplomas with honors) that would look at measures beyond proficiency.
6. **Confusing use of value-added growth measures** with little transparency on how students at various levels of achievement perform (quintile growth).
7. **Disincentives for districts to allow students to perform up to their level of potential** with an overwhelming focus on achieving to low levels of proficiency.

Ohio needs an accountability system that is fair and transparent and that accounts for the performance of all children, sets high expectations for districts and students alike, and discourages districts from gaming the system or resting on their laurels. Our specific recommendations were as follows:

1. **Incorporate high-quality metrics into the accountability system.** Ohio's performance indicators are mediocre at best. They show where minimal levels of proficiency are, but do little to measure how well a district is doing to take students beyond proficiency. The system shows how districts comply with minimum standards but does little to show whether districts are reaching true standards of excellence. Ohio policymakers should consider inclusion of such measures as college remediation rates, performance on Advanced Placement tests, numbers of students who are successfully accelerated, average student performance on ACT/SAT exams, services to gifted students, and numbers of students who qualify for diplomas with honors.
2. **Move to nationally normed benchmarked high school assessments.** Ohio should move away from the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) to a national assessment, such as the ACT or SAT. The OGT serves very little purpose if the state's goal is to ensure that students are college or career ready and fails to provide a basis for national and international comparisons.
3. **Eliminate the labeling of all districts at least until a meaningful system can be developed.** There is not a single district in Ohio that can't improve student performance. Bestowing labels of excellent distracts policymakers and the public alike from examining the individual metrics of each district. It also contributes to the false impression that districts that achieve high ratings do not need to improve student performance and causes districts to game the system in order to achieve a higher ranking. Massachusetts, a state that has very high standards for accountability, uses no district ratings and, in fact, discourages the use of accountability measures to rank districts. Policymakers in that state believe that districts should concentrate on constant improvement toward high-level standards rather than an arbitrary rating that allows districts to declare they have achieved enough.
4. **Incorporate an automatic trigger to increase cut scores.** Even if Ohio policymakers maintain the current system of district rating, the system must be changed to encourage continual growth. One possible solution is to emulate the process in Florida, where cut scores on achievement tests are automatically increased as more districts achieve higher ratings. This ensures that all districts are constantly striving to improve. In addition, the performance levels of "limited basic" and "accelerated" should be eliminated to be consistent with NAEP ratings.
5. **Re-evaluate how the value-added growth measure is used.** Student growth measures are an important part of the state evaluation system, but the current implementation of the measure is confusing. It is bewildering that districts can achieve above-level composite growth scores even

when students in multiple grades are making below-level gains. Any change to this area should include more transparency, such as the ability to view student growth broken down by quintile.

6. **Eliminate multiple pathways to ratings in favor of a single pathway with multiple components.** For any rating to be meaningful and understandable, districts need to be evaluated in the same way.

Analysis of the New System

Unfortunately, the system proposed in SB316 includes almost none of the OAGC recommendations, and many of the problems we identified in the current system continue to exist in the new system. OAGC's review of the proposed new accountability system shows the following areas to be of concern:

1. **The proposed system does not increase standards** -- If the accountability system is designed to provide incentives to districts to achieve specific policy goals, it is difficult to understand what those goals are based on the construction of the new system: The system does not actual raise any student performance standards. The assessments used in the proposed new system are unchanged. The low cut scores are unchanged. The student percentage passage rates are unchanged. In fact, the proposed system is not really a new system at all. It is merely a statistical manipulation of the current system and unlikely to move student progress forward.
2. **The district grading system still allows districts of unlike quality to achieve the same rating** – The one goal in the system appears to be to ensure that very few districts will be able to achieve an “A” rating. That has been accomplished. But the proposed system does not allow the public to clearly understand what the ratings actually mean in terms of the quality of each district. There is still a disparity in the quality of the 17 districts that achieve an “A” rating. (See Exhibit 1) It appears that most of the current A rated districts have merely been pushed into the B category regardless of college and career-ready quality measure. This results in the same disparity in quality among the 381 districts rated a “B” that occurs in the “excellent” ratings in the current system. For instance, one A rated district has reported average ACT scores of 22 and virtually no students taking AP courses while other districts rated B have average ACT scores of 25 or 26 and very high percentages of students successfully taking AP courses. One district rated a C actually has higher ACT scores and AP participation rates than three “A” rated districts.
3. **De-emphasis on growth** -- It is clear that the growth component is de-emphasized in this new system. The new system allows some districts that may or may not be providing adequate student growth to remain at an above average rating while making it very difficult for urban districts and community schools with more challenging student populations to receive adequate ratings even if their students are making good growth. In addition, the measure is still difficult to understand; it is not transparent, and it does not allow for quintile views of student growth. As student growth accounts for 50% of such things as teacher evaluations and the identification of reward, priority, and focus schools, perhaps student growth should also account for 50% of a district's composite rating.
4. **No college- or career- ready metrics** -- Measures such as average ACT/SAT scores and college remediation rates are report-only in the proposed new system. If the goal is to ensure that students are graduating college and career ready, these measures need to be a rated standard.
5. **Lowered and inconsistent grading scales among the four performance measures** -- The standard for an “A” for at least one of the four measures (performance indicator) has actually been lowered.

In fact, the grading scale appears to be inconsistent between measures with widely varying “GPAs” scoring components as “A” through “F.”

6. **Over-emphasis on assessment measures** -- There seems to be no reason to have both a performance index measure and a performance indicator measure. As they are both largely based on assessment scores, it appears to skew the system away from growth and sub-group performance and more toward the minimal standards of proficiency. The performance index was originally created as a temporary measure until value-added could be incorporated into the accountability system. There seems to be little need to continue the use of the performance index as well as the performance indicator metric.
7. **No incentives for districts to continuously improve and to ensure students continuously improve** – A rigorous accountability system would ensure that every district had an incentive to continually improve performance and that every student’s performance mattered. That is not the case in the proposed new system. And even though a gifted performance indicator will be incorporated as one indicator in one of the four performance measures, it would be much more meaningful to also disaggregate the growth of this sub-group (in the appropriate identified areas) to ensure that these students are progressing. In addition, students should be allowed to perform on above-grade level assessments to show growth and extra weights should be developed for students who are subject or grade accelerated to remove the current system disincentives to accelerate students.

While OAGC believes that the current system needs to be overhauled, the proposed system does little to actually support the professed policy goals of the department. Those goals are supposedly to ratchet up the rigor of the standards to college and career ready levels and to ensure that every student counts in the system. Neither of these goals is achieved in the proposed system. We hope that the recommendations from our report will be revisited as this committee considers SB316. We recommend, in particular, that:

- a gifted student sub-group be added to the accountability system;
- the scores of students who are accelerated be weighted to removed the disincentives that currently exist;
- other measures of rigor including ACT/SAT scores, college remediation rates, and performance on Advanced Placement exams be incorporated as a rated performance metric;
- the emphasis of value-added be increased, and
- the composite ratings of districts be eliminated at least until a new accountability system can be developed with new standards and new assessments.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer questions you might have.

For questions or concerns, please contact Ann Sheldon at anngift@aol.com or 614-325-1185.