



Testimony on Substitute House Bill 555 – December 5, 2012

Chairman Lehner, Ranking 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). A little over a year ago, OAGC released a report (Grading on a Curve: The Illusion of Excellence in Ohio's Schools – executive summary attached) that analyzed Ohio's accountability system especially with regard to the explosion of excellent-rated school districts. The purpose of the report was to evaluate the effectiveness of the accountability system and to question whether it was adequate to ensure that Ohio's children will be prepared as the state moves toward college- and career-ready standards. We concluded that the current district rating system is misleading, at best. 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. We also analyzed the impact of the system on services to gifted children. The specific issues we identified in the current system include:

1. **Very low standards for excellence** that only serve to confuse the public and which cause 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 assessment 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 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.

Our specific recommendations to “fix” the current system 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. 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 is 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 to achieve a higher ranking.
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.
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.

Specifically for gifted students, we recommended that:

- **A gifted student value-added sub-group be added to the accountability system** as well as the current gifted performance indicator, and that
- **The scores of students who are accelerated be weighted to remove the disincentives that currently exist.**

We are pleased that HB 555 incorporates many of the recommendations from our report, and we strongly support the changes that drive the continuous progress of gifted children. These changes include specific elements to be part of the gifted performance indicator such as level of performance, value-added progress, level of gifted services provided, identification effort especially regarding under-represented students, staff levels, professional development, and spending levels. The gifted indicator, which is already in current law, and the gifted value-added growth measures are part of the ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) waiver that the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. ODE has already begun work on some of these measures, and all data elements included in the bill for gifted either are currently collected by ODE, have been collected in the past or can easily added. If Ohio is going to have a workforce that is competitive on an international level, we can no longer ignore the needs of gifted children in our schools. Under the current accountability system, a record number of districts this year have been labeled as "excellent" (**387** out of **611** or over **63%**). Conversely, gifted students are being provided service at record level low numbers. In fact, **260** districts decreased services from 2010/2011 to 2011/2012. This is in addition to the **124** districts that chose not to serve any gifted students in either year. Services have decreased by **35%** in less than four years while gifted staffing has decreased by **17%**.

No system is perfect. Frankly, we would prefer that the gifted performance indicator be a graded component vs. a met/not met indicator. However, we believe HB 555 will eventually lead to a robust and transparent accountability system. The new system will provide a more detailed and accurate assessment of Ohio's school districts and ensures that the growth of *all* children in Ohio matters. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

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