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OHIO EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Report Card Study Committee - OEA Testimony

Presented by OEA Vice-President Jeff Wensing

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Good afternoon Co-Chairs Blessing and Jones, and members of the Report Card Study Committee. My name is Jeff Wensing and I am the Vice-President of the Ohio Education Association (OEA).

On behalf of the OEA's more than 122,000 members, I thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on some of the shortcomings of Ohio's report card system, as well as to present a vision for a new and more effectively designed report card system.

Rethinking school report cards

The purpose of a report card system should be to provide useful and meaningful feedback that informs decisions about how to support the well-being and success of students. The report card system in Ohio falls short of this purpose because it is mainly a recitation of standardized test scores that are closely correlated with levels of poverty in our state.

It is time for a new report card system that is student-based, not test-based. A student-based report card should reflect an understanding of and support for the learning needs of all students. It should provide educators, parents, local communities, elected officials and policy makers coherent and logical feedback that serves as the basis for informed action on behalf of students. Such a report card system is needed to provide a balanced picture of how districts and schools deliver a variety of quality education programs, experiential learning opportunities and support services designed to meet the whole-child needs of students.

To this end, OEA recommends that the Report Card Workgroup fundamentally rethink Ohio's school report cards. OEA will be releasing such a proposal in early December that is based on the input and support of OEA members. We hope the OEA proposal serves as a resource for the Workgroup as it considers this important issue. OEA's specific recommendations will be based on the following principles:

- **Stop the use of arbitrary and misleading district/school letter grades.** Studies have shown a direct correlation between the letter grade a district receives on the state report card and the level of wealth of the district. The more impoverished a district is, the lower its report card grade tends to be. There is insufficient attention to the harmful consequences of labeling a school as "failing," without regard to context, which often results in the assumption that no learning is taking place in these schools. When schools are labeled as failing, educators and communities are too often

deprived of the chance to take effective action and instead are compelled to follow the dictates of the state and federal government. In the quest to monitor student test-data, these forced requirements usually mean more test-preparation, more administration, less teaching, and lost time for art, music, student clubs and physical activity.

- **Determine performance, quality and opportunity with more non-testing factors.** Relying solely on test-based indicators linked to summative labels provides a narrow and often deceptive picture of what is happening in a district or school. A more complete and accurate reflection of learning requires a dashboard that gives prominence to important student-based information, not just testing-data. There are many examples, a few of which include completion of advanced coursework, the percentage of teachers who are teaching in their field, and access to full day kindergarten. Students benefit from report cards that also focus on the needs of the whole child. But the only indicators of quality on Ohio's report cards not in some way tied to standardized test results are the 4-year and 5-year graduation rates.
- **Provide useful and understandable feedback that informs decision-making.** Ohio's complicated school accountability system and mysterious statistical methodologies undermine trust and limit coherent use of report card data. The Ohio General Assembly should approve all underlying measurement methodologies recommended by the State Board of Education/Ohio Department of Education.
- **Design report cards that help, not punish.** Ohio's narrow accountability system punishes students, teachers, districts and schools for low standardized test scores, which increases stress and distraction, but not learning.

How can a student-based report card system guide effective action on school improvement?

A partnership between a school and a family is the backbone of a strong, accountable system of student success, especially for students who are not yet meeting expectations. If students are struggling academically, socially, or emotionally, there should be a support system that can address each of those areas. Students would be linked to a well-prepared team of educators who are qualified to help them address their needs. Support would be based on an individual student's learning curve and would be subject to continued monitoring.

There needs to be greater communication between educators and families when students begin to struggle or miss academic benchmarks, are too frequently absent, or experience social, emotional or behavioral problems. All students, no matter where they live or level of growth, should be in schools with sufficient resources to provide support systems that ensure students' needs are addressed. These supports should include but are not limited to health and wellness programs, counseling and mental health services, and interventions necessary to overcome non-academic barriers that so many students in our public schools face.

What is the role of report cards in a fair school accountability system?

Report cards should encourage more learning, not more testing or punishment. However, Ohio's report card system feeds on testing and is a driver in the overuse/misuse of standardized tests. Over-dependence on testing hurts students by discouraging creative thinking and diminishing the effectiveness of instructional practices. Ohio's report card system is also the sole basis of heavy-handed state takeovers of local school districts. This has not gone well for students or anyone else.

As Ohio moves forward, we must embrace the idea that successful schools are places where children want to learn and where parents are proud to send them. The community would have a clear vision of why public education exists and what is needed to provide a strong public education.

Labels of “excellent” or “A” and “failing” or “F” would not be necessary, and a grade would not determine the destiny of a school’s students. It would be acceptable, and even expected, for students to struggle and for educators and students to learn from challenges. Schools would be accountable for keeping students safe and delivering rich learning opportunities for all students.

Communities would feel invested in their schools, and embrace and hold to high standards the students and educators who are learning and working in their neighborhoods.

Educators would be recognized as the leaders and experts in their schools.

Ultimately, accountability would shift from a system of testing and punishing to a system of shared responsibility among students, educators, parents and the community.

Conclusion

OEA appreciates this opportunity to share our feedback and vision with regard to the design and use of district/school report cards in Ohio. We share your commitment to helping students and stand ready to make proactive and helpful contributions to the committee’s review of ongoing problems with Ohio’s report card system.

Thank you for your consideration. I am available for any questions you may have.