



Testimony Prepared for the Ohio House Education Committee

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Chairman Stebelton and members of the House Education Committee, I appreciate this opportunity to talk with you today. Thank you for your leadership in improving education for Ohio's children.

My name is Terry Ryan and I am vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Based in Washington DC, Dayton and Columbus, the Institute is a nonprofit organization that is the nation's leader in advancing educational excellence for every child through quality research, analysis, and commentary, as well as on-the-ground action and advocacy in our home state of Ohio.

Specifically, we advance:

- High standards for schools, students and educators;
- Quality education options for families;
- A more productive, equitable and efficient education system; and
- A culture of innovation, entrepreneurship, and excellence in Ohio.

The Institute is affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, which was approved as a charter (community) school sponsor by the Ohio Department of Education in 2004. We currently sponsor seven schools – two in Dayton, three in Columbus, one in Springfield and one in Cincinnati.

Now to the issues. Despite more than a decade of constant school reform efforts and tens of millions of dollars in new spending, far too many children in the Buckeye State are still ill-prepared for success in college or the workplace. In the recently released 2009 National Assessment of Education Progress (commonly referred to as the nation's report card), just 36 percent of Ohio eighth-graders scored proficient or better in mathematics. The most recent reading results (from 2007) were similar. That means thousands of young Ohioans, reaching the threshold of high school, haven't mastered the ability to do basic computations or read critically, let alone grasp the essentials of science, history, or civics.

And the data are far bleaker for poor and minority youngsters. Consider the academic achievement data for children in Dayton during the last school year. No student in the Gem City attended a public school (district or charter) that was rated Excellent or Excellent with Distinction, and just 36 percent of students attended a school rated B or C (Effective or Continuous Improvement), while 65 percent of students in Dayton attended a school rated D or F.

Yet, we know it need not be this way. Nothing matters more to student learning than teacher quality. Not class size, not poverty, not family background, not even overall school quality. The fact is that highly effective teachers routinely propel students from below grade level to advanced levels in a single year.

The significance of this finding can't be understated. Many people still believe either that "these kids can't learn" or that "school can only do so much with kids like this until society fixes their families and communities."

It is because of such dismal statistics and the power of effective teaching that my Fordham colleagues and I, including our board consisting in large part of distinguished education experts, find merit in House Bill 21. But, we

would urge the state to go even beyond the language in this bill to create new alternative educator pathways that not only welcome Teach for America alumni to Ohio, but also create opportunities for Teach for America, the New Teacher Project and other alternative teacher programs to operate in Ohio. We need innovation in how we recruit and train teachers and these programs are part of the solution we should embrace as a state.

Consider that Ohio is losing some of our most talented college graduates who want to teach but haven't gone through traditional education programs. To give you a sense of scale, last year alone over 100 of our top college graduates joined TFA in another state and many won't come back. These teachers and others like them represent some of America's finest young educators and by not embracing these programs and their talent we are literally losing talent who could be making a difference in the lives of Ohio's neediest students.

A 2009 Urban Institute study of TFA teachers at the high school level showed that they were more effective than their traditionally trained peers, including more experienced teachers and those fully certified in their field. According to the Urban Institute, "the impact on student achievement of having a TFA teacher was at least twice that of having a teacher with three or more years of experience relative to a new teacher."

Five years ago I visited the Teach for America headquarters in New York City and on the wall was a map with red pins in each state where Teach for America operates. Ohio was a void surrounded by red. Now is the time to open up alternatives; and to give school districts and charter schools the opportunity to hire alternatively trained and recruited teachers.

The next component of House Bill 21, loosening the cyber-charter moratorium to make it possible for high performing cyber-schools to open and operate in Ohio makes good sense. It is clear that the power of

information and communication technologies and on-line learning to improve and customize learning for children is accelerating. Almost 30,000 young Ohioans already attend e-schools and receive their instruction online rather than in school buildings. Yet this is but a drop in the bucket in terms of what is possible for the state's 1.75 million K-12 public school students. If this sector is encouraged, it will lead to powerful educational innovations, exciting partnerships between classroom-based and on-line learning, and increased 24/7 learning opportunities for the state's children. Ohio already has some quality cyber schools – Connections Academy and the Ohio Virtual Academy come to mind – but there are other great operators waiting to come here as well.

Today, however, Ohio does very little by way of “hybrid” instruction. In fact, the state's present school funding systems doesn't know how to pay for such models. It distinguishes sharply between classroom-based instruction and full-time, online learning and doesn't allow blending them. This needs to be changed. Further, Ohio's moratorium restricts new opportunities for school districts and others to partner on more cost-effective methods of instruction – at a time when we need it the most – and ultimately limits opportunities for families and students.

Lifting the moratorium doesn't have to mean turning a blind eye toward quality, either. Just as Ohio has wisely installed a performance-based requirement for new charter operators in the state, a similar vetting process could be implemented to determine which e-schools should open. As someone with many years of experience authorizing charter schools –and closing some for poor academic performance – I encourage you all to think about necessary quality-control provisions in addition to lifting the moratorium so that Ohio can be a leader when it comes to not just the number of innovative e-schools operating here, but the number of high-quality ones.

Lastly, student academic progress data should absolutely be one of the components in creating a fair, accurate and useful measure of teacher effectiveness. High-performing teachers also deserve to be rewarded for delivering results, especially with our neediest students and in hard to staff subjects like advanced science and mathematics. And those who can't deliver results need to be removed from the profession. According to a recent report by the Brookings Institute, if student achievement is the coin of the realm for education, value-added data is superior to other existing methods of classifying teachers. Classifications that rely on other measurable characteristics of teachers – like certification or advanced degrees – considered singly or in aggregate, are not in the same league in terms of predicting future performance as evaluation based on value-add.

I testified in support of these three primary components of House Bill 21, when they were included in Senate Bill 180, before the Senate education committee in October 2009. At that time only four states (Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas) required that evidence of student learning be the preponderant criterion in teacher evaluations. Few states had policies embracing high-quality virtual school options. Other states were plagued by bureaucratic licensure barriers that prevented some of the best candidates from entering the teaching profession.

But much has changed just in the last year and change is happening fast in states across the country. The reality is that Ohio risks being leapfrogged by dozens of states in many crucial areas of education reform. If we do not put the state on a fast track toward improving its schools and enacting much-needed reforms, Ohio's students and the state's future will surely pay the price.

Thus, while I support House Bill 21 and its passage, I encourage this legislature to think more boldly. While this bill is a good start, it does not go

far enough toward enacting the education reforms Ohio needs. These changes –even though I fully support them – only tinker at the margins.

Ohio needs a complete overhaul of its teacher evaluation system so that we can distinguish effective teachers from the rest. School districts need avenues to dismiss chronic under-performers. The way we reward, retain, and recruit teachers need to be based on student performance, not on seniority or credentials. Layoffs, painful as they are, should be based on teacher effectiveness rather than on a 1941 “last-in first-out law.” The economic hard times we face create a rare opportunity to rethink education and to make things better by making them different, to reshape and reallocate; to actually move from “reform as add-on” to “reform as substitute.” Now is not the time to defend the status quo.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for this opportunity to share my views with you today. I look forward to your questions and comments.