

Joint Education Oversight Committee

Testimony on Ohio's State Plan for the Every Student Succeeds Act

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Good afternoon Chairman Cupp, Ranking Member Sykes, and esteemed members of the Committee. I am Robert Hlasko, superintendent of Cory-Rawson Local Schools in Hancock County. Before I delve into my testimony, I'd like to sincerely thank all of you for your willingness to place such a significant value on education. I'd especially like to thank Rep. Fedor for her gracious invitation to testify today.

While I could speak at length about various aspects of the Ohio draft plan to meet ESSA, Rep. Fedor specifically asked me to share my research which I am in the process of completing in pursuit of a doctoral degree from the University of Findlay. Two years ago I embarked on a study which seeks to answer three questions about the mission of schools in Ohio.

1. What do stakeholders feel is the mission of K-12 education in Ohio?
2. According to stakeholder groups, are schools satisfying this mission?
3. According to stakeholder groups, how are schools not meeting this mission?

While my qualitative study is admittedly limited in scope and scale, I hoped to gain a better understanding of what parents, educators, and legislators thought about those 3 questions. I realize that my study cannot purport to represent all stakeholder opinions; however, it is arguably a significant piece of the puzzle in determining what stakeholders in the various district types across the state are saying about the educational landscape. Utilizing the Ohio Department of Education defined school district typologies I traveled to various districts to host focus groups and sent out surveys to other districts to distribute to educators and parents. While my dissertation is incomplete, I can share with you my findings to date, specifically as they relate to the topic of Ohio's draft plan to meet ESSA requirements.

What do stakeholders feel is the mission of K-12 education in Ohio?

My research identified 14 distinct thematic missions. The majority of stakeholders felt that "preparation" for college or career was the mission of K-12 education in Ohio. Interestingly, providing a "well-rounded education" and "citizenship" which identified social, cultural, and life skills as the desired outcome were also often identified as the mission of K-12 schools in Ohio. While the evidence indicates 3 main themes it also indicates that stakeholders hold varied and diverse opinions about the mission of schools. Also of note is that when asked about what they felt other stakeholder groups believed to be the mission there were equally diverse responses. Parents responded that educators probably thought the mission was "preparation for college or career" or "testing" students. Parents held that legislators thought the mission was "testing" kids or to improve our "state ranking" in the country. Educators indicated that they felt parents believed it was either "preparation", "testing", or "providing a basic education". Educators thought that legislators held the mission to be "preparation" or "testing".

According to stakeholder groups, are schools satisfying this mission?

Parents overwhelmingly indicated that schools in Ohio are not meeting the mission they defined; however, many of them provided a caveat that they believed schools faced an impossible mission as currently defined and would continue to fall short without increased support from home and deregulation by government. Educators were more evenly split on whether or not all schools were meeting the mission, with the majority indicating that they were not. Interestingly, both groups were more likely to indicate that their school district is either partially or fully meeting the mission. This finding agrees with previous research in this area that stakeholders are more likely to hold a disparate view between their school and other schools with which they're not affiliated regardless of any Report Card or other ranking structure.

The most significant finding in this area was that parents overwhelmingly indicated that their measure of a school's success was their own child's experience or other anecdotal evidence. A portion of them indicated that future success well into college and career should be considered as a potential measure for school success. Only a handful pointed to the Report Card as a means for them to measure a school's success, as evidenced by one parent's quote "I cannot know if the schools are always meeting the mission. I can only go off my own child's experience", while another exclaimed "those test scores mean nothing to me" and a third iterated "I don't think we need a test to show us they're ready...I think we know they're ready because of the time we spend with them...we can learn in so many ways that aren't a test".

According to stakeholder groups, how are schools not meeting this mission?

As previously indicated both parents and educators indicated that schools not meeting the mission should not be considered a failure because the challenges with which they're faced are not entirely under their control. Many indicated that poverty and lack of family engagement cannot always be overcome. A parent stated "there are a lot who aren't satisfying it and I think a lot of it has to do with income disparity and poverty...they shut schools down...or change all the teachers, but it doesn't change poverty, it just kind of moves it around." Another parent quote serves as a summary for many others in stating "the effectiveness of schools is being legislated out". Yet another indicated that "I've worked in a broken school...a big part of the answer is relentless love...poverty can't be an excuse...ya gotta work with what you got". From my own experience as a school superintendent I can anecdotally tell you that teachers are increasingly indicating that they don't have time to care for students like they used to and they dearly miss those opportunities.

Intermixed with many responses was a direct or indirect belief by many educators and parents that they while they have an opinion about what schools should be doing they don't actually know the mission for Ohio schools. One educator even asked "is there an actual written mission for the state of Ohio because I've never seen or heard it communicated by the Department of Education". Moreover, both parents and educators indicated a strong desire for deregulation of education, more local control, and more say in the process. It was interesting to find that many believed the foundational mission for education should be unchanging but the process to achieve that mission should evolve and change over time. Overwhelmingly, among 13 identified stakeholder categories, they indicated educators and parents should be the primary stakeholders in the change process; conversely, they felt that legislators and the Department of Education were the primary stakeholders currently developing the mission.

What does all this tell us and how does it relate to ESSA?

Ohio's plan to define how we will meet federal ESSA requirements represents an unprecedented opportunity for stakeholders. While it is not necessarily the only defining structure for education in Ohio it exists as a significant foundation for the foreseeable future. While my research indicates that stakeholders desire to have more of a voice, the Ohio Department of Education did just the opposite in asking for their input prior to drafting the plan and then not heeding it. I always tell my principals when we consider gathering community or educator input – if we're not willing to heed their advice then don't waste their time and damage our relationship. Stakeholders strongly indicated that they desired to decrease testing in both the ODE comment period and in my research, yet the ESSA draft plan does not do so. At least one ODE administrator has explained that anytime they try to do away with a test they are faced with pushback because groups do not want their content area to be devalued. This highlights the very issue that ESSA can redress. In an era where we have indoctrinated stakeholders to believe that tests are all that matter you cannot turn to them and say we are taking away a test and, thus, infer that a specific area such as social studies doesn't matter. Far beyond the stretch of ESSA this requires a culture change which can only be initiated through open and continued dialogue with stakeholders. Stakeholders must trust the process and the past years of consistent change have done little to imbue confidence. If we want to shift where our values lie to better align with all stakeholders we need to understand where we are headed. ESSA provides the opportunity to redefine or more clearly define what we value.

As I always desire to not simply admire the problem I, as both a researcher and a school superintendent, would humbly suggest the 3 following areas as potential for positive change:

1. Heed stakeholder input and commit to decreasing testing as allowed by federal guidelines
2. Reconsider how we measure accountability. Again, I would point out that one ODE official expressed that, when asked, parents said they like the A-F report card. I would argue that the right question was not asked – parents do not know what alternatives might exist for measuring accountability. Many in my research indicated they do not shy away from accountability, but they also expressed that it should not be punitive. Moreover, I would argue that it does not currently, but should, drive realistic school improvement. What this looks like cannot be derived without asking those stakeholders who are directly impacted.
3. Work with stakeholder groups to consider Ohio's mission, identify it in the ESSA plan, and work beyond the plan to clearly communicate that vision. I realize that you, as representatives of the people, cannot satisfy everyone. Simultaneously, I would respectfully submit that my research indicates that we are not doing as well as we should in representing our stakeholders.

I want to thank the committee for the time you have graciously granted me. I applaud all of you for your service on this committee and your continued commitment to education. While I do not purport to have all the answers, I appreciate your willingness to consider one superintendent's humble perspective.