

Testimony to the Ohio Joint Education Oversight Committee, March 2, 2017  
from Heights Coalition for Public Education  
on Ohio's ESSA Plan to Be Submitted to the U.S. Department of Education



Our school district, Cleveland Heights-University Heights in Cuyahoga County, serves a mixed income community where a significant number of students live in poverty and many others are part of the Cuyahoga County social service system. Over sixty percent of our students qualify for free lunch. Ohio's opportunity gap in public school resources is our most pressing concern. School districts in our state that serve many children in poverty must provide small classes and very expensive services but receive too little state money and lose very significant dollars to charter schools and Ed Choice Vouchers. Here are our priorities for Ohio's plan under the Every Student Succeeds Act.

**Reduce Reliance on Standardized Testing.** With two-thirds of the test score variance attributable to outside of school factors (Vermont State Board of Education Letter on ESSA <http://nepc.colorado.edu/blog/essa-vermont>), test score gaps measure the health of our society more than the quality of the schools. Our school district needs more support and less blame and punishment from the state of Ohio. Though we know that ESSA continues to demand annual testing of all children, we are emphatic that Ohio's ESSA plan must reduce reliance on standardized testing to the bare minimum required by the federal government.

**Unbuckle Teacher Evaluation from Students' Standardized Test Scores.** Our district's teachers are well qualified professionals. No Child Left Behind Waivers---which demanded that teacher evaluation be tied to students' standardized tests---are gone. ESSA does not require that states buckle teacher evaluations to students' test scores, Evidence shows that two-thirds of test score gaps are attributable to outside of school factors (Vermont State Board of Education Letter on ESSA <http://nepc.colorado.edu/blog/essa-vermont>). Tying teachers' evaluations to test scores unfairly punishes teachers who work with children in poverty. There are far more effective ways to evaluate teachers including well established peer assistance and review programs. The state should establish a plan for teacher evaluation that includes coaching, mentoring, time for collaboration, and support and evaluation by strong school leaders.

**Reject the Use of a Single Summative Score for Ranking Schools and School Districts.** The letter grades Ohio currently assigns to schools and school districts should also be eliminated. These grades are overly reliant on standardized tests, and they negatively stigmatize schools and districts that serve concentrations of children living in poverty. Ohio's school and school district grades are, in essence, redlining schools districts in the city and inner-ring suburbs while incentivizing parents to choose the wealthy, so-called "excellent" (A-rated) school districts in the outer-ring suburbs. The letter grades create incentives for greater residential segregation by both family income and race.

Ohio must reject the idea of labeling and ranking schools and school districts with a single summative score submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. While ESSA requires Ohio to inform the public about the state of education in our schools and school districts, it does not require combining all accountability measures into a single score. Dangerously, a single measure based on test scores penalizes schools and school districts that serve our state's neediest children.

**Add an Opportunity Index as the Fourth ESSA Measure of School and School District Quality.** ESSA says that in their evaluation plans, states must emphasize test scores in reading, test scores in math, and graduation rates. ESSA also encourages states to be creative by adding one or more additional measures, disaggregated by subgroup, as part of their evaluation plans. To ensure access for all children to a well-rounded education, we propose that Ohio incorporate an Opportunity Index that affirms the schools and school districts that serve larger percentages of children living in poverty, children in their county's social service system, children who qualify for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and English Language Learners.

The numbers of students in each of these categories should be reported, and additionally school districts should be given credit when they can demonstrate that they are consciously expanding the opportunity to learn by serving these children in small classes, enriching very young children in pre-K and full day Kindergarten, providing ample access to counselors, actively engaging these students in enrichment in the sciences and social sciences, and actively engaging these students in the visual arts, vocal and instrumental music, and theater.