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Prepared Testimony Submission - James Lautzenheiser
Joint Educational Oversight Committee
Ohio General Assembly

Thank you for this opportunity to address the committee about the Ohio ESSA plan and public education in the State of Ohio. My name is James Lautzenheiser. I teach American history at the eighth grade level at Crestview Middle School in Convoy, Ohio, in Van Wert County. Over the past year I have had the chance to work with our district administration to develop a plan to inform our staff and extended educational community about the window for flexibility, modification and improvement for the Ohio ESSA Plan. I can say with confidence that our district was pleased to hear that the federal guidelines connected to the ESSA plan were relaxed to offer each state the ability to craft a more focused set of policies that could improve public education within that specific state. It has been frustrating; however, to note that the Ohio ESSA plan proposals seem to closely resemble past editions of the policy package despite this avenue for revision and improvement.

I can attest to the fact that the Ohio Department of Education has gone out of their way to host listening sessions, provide collaborative webinars and allow opportunities for stakeholder feedback. The frustrating element of this process has been connected to the culminating reports that seem to outline that many key responses from stakeholders around Ohio have not been included in the plans for future change and implementation. What good have these opportunities for feedback served our school children if we cannot see the development of feedback present in future policy improvements?

Specifically, I'd like to address the concept of local control in the assessment process from an educator's viewpoint. While most advocates of public education are comfortable using this buzz phrase in liberal fashion, our students are still taking a wave of standardized tests that constantly change in format or stressed set of skills from year to year. Teachers and administrators are anchored to a past pattern of constantly changing set of procedures, formulas, data sets and expectations for these standardized tests. Because I am not assessed in the classroom with a standardized statewide test, I am the type or category of teacher that instead has to design and implement a district-approved SLO or student-learning objective for my curriculum. At first I was annoyed and frustrated that I would have to design the SLO for my classroom, but I can tell you that I after nearly five years with the process that I appreciate the local control associated with the assessment component. Each year I have the ability to design components and timelines for initial student assessments in my course. All of my projected content pre-assessments have to be vetted, reviewed and approved by my colleagues in the social studies department, and then my rationale and projections for student growth travel with these content pre-assessments and rubrics to a district panel for SLO review and approval. Our district panels are comprised of teachers and administrators. As a past member on this panels, I can attest to the healthy discussions linked to test viability, rigor in the content area and expectations for student growth within the teacher's plans for assessment and self-evaluation. At each level of plan design, careful focus was placed on the ideas of the instructor and the well-being of the students in the classroom. I believe that our district and other public school districts have the capability to use this application of local control in other areas; including subject areas that are typically reserved for statewide standardized testing. When districts have the ability to pool resources, brainstorm and develop an appropriate plan for implementation of local methods like the SLO network of collaboration, coordination and

evaluation; real local control of public education can lead to effective results for the district and the district's students. Last month, Senator Hite visited our district along with Representative Riedel and State Board Representative Linda Haycock. Senator Hite inspired many in the room that afternoon to advocate on behalf of our students and community. If we truly believe that public educators are the real-life experts on public education, more trust needs to be given to those at the local level to handle assessments, evaluations and responses for our children at the local level.

Additionally, the current A-F report card needs to be reformed in order to help provide feedback that is more readily understandable for our community's parents and stakeholders. At the same time, the reported "grades" need to be transferable to public expectations for success. For example, meeting annual growth in an area should not yield a "C" when many of our children's parents are expecting a grade of "A" for that same type of definition. A report card that is viewed as punitive or driving reactionary policies by local districts or driven by state mandates cannot be as successful as one that actually reports measured items. In rural, west-central Ohio, we cannot afford to miss out on corporate investment and development in our county because of an interpreted report card that shows that schools with past success might be blundering in areas that aren't even easily understood or transmittable on a statewide reporting device.

Local control of the public education process and statewide reporting of student performance are only two items that need to be considered at this point in the conversation. That is why it is vitally important that the Ohio ESSA plan receive more attention in the form of substantive debate and examination, and that the Ohio General Assembly demand that the Ohio Department of Education slow down the process for approving and implementing the current plan. Our children and our local communities deserve more than a diligent listening tour and a series of webinars. We cannot afford to sit back and watch a poor ESSA plan for Ohio schools be rubber-stamped. I ask you today to urge your colleagues to pressure the Ohio Department of Education to incorporate feedback from public educators across the State of Ohio, and create an Ohio ESSA plan that truly allows our public schools to be great.