



**Testimony to the Ohio Joint Education Oversight Committee, March 9, 2017,
on Ohio's ESSA Plan to Be Submitted to the U.S. Department of Education,
from Jeanne Melvin, President of Public Education Partners**

President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), an overhaul of federal education law, in December of 2015. According to the Ohio Department of Education's website, "passed with bipartisan support, ESSA represents a shift from broad federal oversight of primary and secondary education to greater flexibility and decision making at the state and local levels. Ohio is committed to involving educators, parents and other stakeholders as we explore new ways to ensure that all our students receive the education they need for bright futures."

I was very happy to hear about the proposed involvement of experienced educators and parents, because since the early 1990s, ODE and many of our elected leaders seem to have depended more heavily on edicts from Washington, anti-public education think tanks, and major foundations, such as Gates and the Walton family, for advice and direction in education issues.

I attended the ESSA meeting at the King Arts Center in Columbus in August, a conversation in one of a series of conversations across the state. The event was sponsored by Philanthropy Ohio, the Ohio Department of Education, and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and was promoted as a way to "engage in a regional meeting to share thoughts and perspectives on the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and Ohio's developing state plan." This meeting was billed as "an exciting opportunity to gather valuable input from various perspectives from local educators, funders, parents, students and community members." <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/columbus-essa-stakeholder-meeting-registration-26527330961#>

I participated in the Ohio Department of Education's online survey, because I read that ODE was "actively engaging with stakeholders, school leaders, teachers and parents as the department works to develop the state's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan. In an effort to reach out to more Ohioans about these important issues, the department created a survey to get feedback on several focus areas within ESSA, including accountability measures, school improvement, educator quality and student supports." <http://education.ohio.gov/Media/Ed-Connection/Aug-22-2016/Help-Develop-Ohios-Every-Student-Succeeds-Act-Sta>

The massive amount of feedback from the statewide ESSA stakeholder meetings and the ODE online survey was overwhelmingly in support of less state-mandated testing and less test-based accountability.

Philanthropy Ohio, the organization asked to make sense of the input from stakeholder meetings reported that, "All sectors of the community—parents, families, teachers, administrators and community members—raised concerns about the assessments."

https://www.philanthropyohio.org/sites/default/files/White%20Paper_11.11_lr_FINAL.pdf

In ODE's ESSA online survey, there were 11,287 responses received from each of Ohio's 88 counties, and in addition to responding to specific questions, several general themes emerged. Survey respondents generally referenced a preference for a reduction in testing; more stability and consistency; reduce the rate of change; more "wraparound" services, including mental health services; additional art, music and physical education offerings; additional services for students with disabilities and students identified as gifted; more decision making at the local level; and greater accountability and less funding for charter schools. <http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Every-Student-Succeeds-Act-ESSA/ESSA-Online-Survey-Results.pdf.aspx>

Imagine everyone's surprise when ODE unveiled its draft ESSA plan in February, which did exactly the opposite of what 15,000 stakeholders said they wanted. The draft plan proposed to keep the same level of testing!

Each state was expected to reach out to stakeholders for input, a mandate ODE spokesperson Brittany Halpin said Ohio takes very seriously. "A plan that is deeply rooted in the needs of Ohio's students, educators and communities requires everyone's input," she said in a written statement. "Our goal was to meaningfully engage diverse groups of stakeholders to solicit a range of thoughts, opinions and recommendations."

So, was the goal simply *to reach out, engage, and solicit feedback* from parents, education professionals, and other stakeholders, only to exclude the responses from well over 15,000 people and stay with the status quo?

I recently had a conversation with a person closely connected to the sponsors of the statewide stakeholder meetings, and I said that it was very unfortunate that stakeholder feedback had been ignored by ODE leaders when developing their draft ESSA plan. I was told that our responses were rejected, because they didn't go along with the philosophy of the leaders at the Ohio Department of Education. How disingenuous to waste the valuable time and dismiss the thoughtful input of thousands of people, because they didn't provide the same old answers that ODE wanted to hear!

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) promised to return fundamental decisions about education to parents, community members, and educators with the most at stake in our public schools, while continuing to focus on our students. The law's ultimate success will depend on state plans being carefully crafted and implemented— and that, in turn, requires *collaboration* between stakeholders, legislators, and ODE.

I urge the Ohio Department of Education to hold on to the ESSA Plan until September, and submit it after it's been corrected to reflect the ideas of thousands of Ohioans who asked for less state-mandated testing and less test-based accountability.

Our children are counting on us to get this right!

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