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Chairwoman Manning, Ranking Member Patterson and members of the Joint Education Oversight Committee. Thank you for allowing me to testify on the Ohio Department of Education's recommended definitions related to online learning. My name is Erik Tritsch and I'm the executive director of Fairborn Digital Academy (FDA). FDA is dropout-prevention and recovery online high school program sponsored by the Fairborn City Schools. We have been in operation since 2002.

Below are my thoughts on the recommendations made by ODE:

1) "Documentation of Online Learning"

We appreciate that ODE acknowledges not all learning occurs through the school's use of a learning management system. Work outside the system, such as writing a research paper, certainly takes place and should be properly documented. Often this work is documented through a student- or parent-generated report. This report must then be verified by a teacher. That teacher could be at risk of losing his or her license should the report be challenged. We feel that a teacher should not have to risk his or her license each time he or she is required to verify a report. This is unfair to the teacher. Additionally, ODE must ensure that students are able to move easily between systems and should also provide guidance on how to best document and measure time not captured by the learning management system.

2) "Idle Time"

I agree with ODE in that when trying to define idle time it is important that the state doesn't constrain schools by creating a strict policy when it comes to idle time. Each school and student need to have flexibility to ensure that the student is receiving the necessary support without fear of a "forced logoff."

3) "Educational" and "Noneducational"

It is important to acknowledge that most services provided to students are "educational." ODE rightfully recognizes that measures of student participation, and the funding that is paid based on such participation, can include both educational activities and noneducational activities. ODE suggests that noneducational activities include counseling and career exploration. We fear that if these services are not included in the definition of "education" they could go unfunded and ultimately discourage schools from offering these vital services.

4) “Participation”

ODE’s recommended definition reflects the standard currently applied. When documenting “participation” Ohio must not force a teacher to risk his or her license in verifying offline learning participation. As previously mentioned, wraparound services such as social services, counseling and career exploration should be included in “participation.” It is also important to avoid tying students to seat time, as we deprive them of valuable, project-based learning opportunities. Ohio must ensure that the definition is student-focused. Furthermore, the state should consider the cost of monitoring technology and how that technology is paid for.

5) “Classroom”

ODE suggests that a definition of “classroom” has little relevancy to online school operations since the independence and personalization of learning are the cornerstones of online education. While we agree that our school does offer a personal program designed to help students achieve their goals, it is important to recognize that even though we are an “e-school” we do offer computer labs and physical classrooms for our students. In 2004, the Black Lane Elementary School became the home to Fairborn Digital Academy, allowing us to offer additional services to our students in a true classroom setting.

Reviewing these terms are an important part of the larger e-school funding discussion. In addition to developing appropriate definitions for the FTE manual, the state needs to consider challenges that many e-schools face. In the dropout prevention and recovery school environment it takes time to create trust between a student and his or her teachers. The hours, days, and weeks it takes to motivate the unmotivated often go unfunded because the services we provide are not “documented” nor do they count as “educational opportunities.” Nevertheless, these services are provided, even if they go unfunded by the state. I urge the committee to keep this in mind as the discussion of e-school funding continues.

I would like to thank the committee for its consideration of my comments today and I’ll be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Erik Tritsch
Executive Director
Fairborn Digital Academy