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Ohio Senate Primary & Secondary Education Committee

Scott DiMauro – President, Ohio Education Association

SB 295 – Opposition Testimony

December 10, 2024

Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Ohio Senate Primary & Secondary Education Committee, my name is Scott DiMauro. I am a high school social studies teacher from Worthington with 16 years of classroom experience and currently serve as President of the Ohio Education Association (OEA). On behalf of our approximately 120,000 members, thank you for the opportunity to provide opposition testimony on Senate Bill (SB) 295.

SB 295 proposes a heavy handed and overreaching state approach to local schools that receive low ratings on state report cards. The bill would expand reliance on standardized test scores for labeling schools as underperforming, arbitrarily forcing districts to take extreme measures such as wasting prior investments in school buildings by closing them, transferring control to external operators that have no link to the community, or indiscriminately replacing at least half a building's staff based on assumptions and regardless that it would likely be impossible to replace that staff.

The most likely impact of the actions compelled by SB 295 would be to harm students and communities. The draconian actions required by the bill do not allow consideration for mitigating factors or the use of common sense in situations where it is obvious that taking such actions would be counterproductive and cause irreparable damage to an otherwise well-functioning school. Language in the bill also speaks to overriding collective bargaining agreements, which always strips districts of local control and educators of their voice to advocate on behalf of students. All of these steps would contribute to destabilizing schools and communities, which does not help students.

The proposals in SB 295 also contradict the state report card guidance on how to interpret low ratings. The report card description for one star, the lowest possible rating, is "Needs significant **support** to meet state standards." SB 295 does not do this. Instead of offering significant support, SB 295 proposes significant punishments that will most likely destabilize schools where good and great things are happening, even if those successes



are not revealed on data printouts of standardized test scores. The punitive approach of SB 295 draws further concern by triggering those penalties with narrow report card measures based on test scores triggered by arbitrary cutoffs. This approach ensures significant numbers of schools are continuously under threat of heavy-handed state penalties, an approach unlikely to benefit students or anyone else. This simplistic and punitive approach is the opposite of what Ohio state report cards call for and OEA opposes it.

The proposals in SB 295 mirror the failed policies of the past that focus on penalizing districts without addressing the root causes of opportunity gaps, such as poverty, mental health challenges, community disengagement, and the educator shortage.

Top-down mandates that rely on flawed testing data have not worked and will not work. For example, SB 295 repeats the same mistakes of the state takeover concept still in Ohio law, an experiment that clearly failed in three consecutive districts and should therefore be repealed. Those repeated mistakes include 1) proposing large-scale interventions in local schools based on narrow and misleading testing data, and 2) assuming without evidence that test score data deemed too low by the state is the result of shortcomings in district leadership or teachers, and not rooted in some other cause, such as family and community-wide poverty, deprivation, and other traumas that create known physiological barriers to learning.

The barriers to learning caused by poverty do not disappear when a state punishes a school district. Rather, these barriers are alleviated and relieved by providing students with access to “wraparound services” that get students to school and ready to learn. This “community learning center” concept seeks real solutions by focusing on root causes, such as meeting the basic needs of students that are known precursors to being prepared to learn. For example, a student who needs glasses can’t read, a student who is hungry can’t pay attention, and a student embarrassed by rotting teeth doesn’t ask questions. These challenges have nothing to do with school leadership or teacher quality, so arbitrarily changing principals and teachers does nothing to meet the learning needs of students or increase the test scores that are deemed so valuable by the state.

If there is going to be a three-strikes-and-you’re-out rule, it should apply to the stale, failed, repackaged, top-down, big government, standardized testing driven proposals in SB 295.

SB 295 also continues the mistakes of the past by punishing poverty instead of offering helping or supporting schools and students. The bill does this by aimlessly and needlessly destabilizing schools and students with flagrant and draconian punishments linked to test scores whose value has been debunked, as the state report card confirms every year that standardized test scores merely correlate with community poverty rates and do not reflect

the inherent value and quality of schools. This is why broader, non-test based measures have been added to the report in recent years, such as the Student Opportunity Profile, a shift in perspective and direction that OEA commends the General Assembly for making.

In closing, OEA calls on the Ohio General Assembly to oppose SB 295 and shift its perspective away from punishing poverty (which happens when misleading test scores are used to break schools), and move to a perspective that recognizes the barriers to learning caused by poverty (which happens when the state seeks to alleviate those barriers with policies that support student learning needs).

Ohio's students and educators deserve better than repackaging the failed policies of the past. In the alternative, OEA stands ready to work on solutions that address systemic challenges and invest in our schools so that every student has the opportunity has the support and resources they need to prevail over the challenges they face.

Thank you again for this opportunity to address the committee and I am available for any questions.