

Chair Blessing, Vice Chair Jones, Ranking Member Robinson and Members of the Committee:

My name is Colleen O'Connell and I'm a middle school teacher in Reynoldsburg City Schools. House Bill 239 is essential for students, families and educators. As a teacher, I have directly experienced how over-testing has fractured relationships between districts, administration, teachers, staff, and, most importantly, students in our schools.

For example, earlier this year in a meeting at my school, an administrator announced that we would be taking three entire instructional days and devoting them to AIR Practice testing. Our frustration as a staff was unspoken; we knew that our control and our influence were removed in this situation, just as it is on actual state testing days. Our frustration as educators, though unspoken, was clearly palpable, and this administrator followed up with what they may have believed was a rallying cry: "We're a *testing culture*, and testing isn't going anywhere. The *best* thing we can do is help our kids succeed on these tests."

According to this statement, the best thing for the children I love and teach is taking three instructional days just for school-wide AIR preparation (not including all the other preparation for district tests and all of the embedded AIR preparation pushed into daily teaching). According to this statement, the best thing we can do for the many children I teach affected by trauma is taking my calm, gentle room designed specifically be a safe, considerate space and turn it into a rigid, unfeeling setting where the teacher they've grown to trust and love speaks not from the heart but reads from a script. In fact, one of the children I teach that relies on me to be that gentle, affirming, calming presence said to me, "I hate you can't *sound* like *my teacher* when we test."

Not only does testing force educators to push pause on caring for the whole child socially and emotionally, it stunts growth and effective pedagogy. I frequently hear people call for education to create critical, analytical, thinkers who can engage in civic debate and civil, informed discussion. I take this duty as a teacher very seriously; my students frequently engage in informed, well-researched discussion surrounding social issues, learning how to debate, persuade, and ask critical questions about the world around them. They work to become problem solvers that will have the mindset and skills needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This all stops on the days when we test or prepare for a test. This is infuriating to my students, who can clearly see that over-testing removes them from their meaningful work. This year, one student, in a day during the *three straight weeks* of state and district testing, looked at me in angry tears as he came into my room and said, "I'm so tired. Why can't we just have discussions again?" Remembering the sound of his voice and the pain on his face as he begged to engage in critical thinking still makes me feel as if I betray my kids by engaging in a system that over-tests them.

So, how could this bill help my middle school students? First, it could ensure that their not-too-distant high school experience will not be as test-burdened as it currently would be. Even more directly and readily affecting my students are the aspects that require districts to truly consider and restructure how they dedicate time to state *and* district tests. I love

that this bill includes a requirement that districts convene a workgroup to recommend ways to reduce testing. Even more, I love that it ties action to the ODE provisions that limit the amount of time testing and preparing for testing that districts can take. Even my students know that a rule without a consequence is a rule that is never followed. It's time for Ohio to start taking action so that I have more time to teach, my kids have more time to learn, and we all have more time to love school again.