

ACCELERATING STUDENT LEARNING IN OHIO

**Five Policy Recommendations
for Strengthening Public Education
in the Buckeye State**

**September
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Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
INTRODUCTION	7
Recommendation I: Create World-Class Standards and Stronger Accountability Mechanisms	9
Recommendation II: Ensure that Funding is Fairly Allocated Among All Children and Schools	11
Recommendation III: Recruit the Best and Brightest to Lead Schools and Empower Them to Succeed	13
Recommendation IV: Improve Teacher Quality	14
Recommendation V: Expand the Quality of, and Access to, a Range of High-Performing School Options ..	17
CONCLUSION	20
ABOUT THE INSTITUTE	21
ENDNOTES	22

Executive Summary

Ohioans of every background and political inclination agree that our state needs a system of public education that attains three critical goals: 1) maximizes the talents of every child; 2) is as strong as any in the world in overall achievement; and 3) closes the persistent academic gaps between rich and poor, black and white and brown.

Fortunately, Ohio has been moving down a path of school reform that points toward these three paramount goals. It has constructed the beginnings of a competent policy framework for revitalizing and strengthening K-12 education in the Buckeye State. This framework rests on 1) rigorous statewide academic standards; 2) assessments and other measures by which achievement and progress are gauged; 3) accountability measures intended to boost performance; and 4) innovative schools and schools of choice.

This report offers five recommendations for strengthening Ohio's education renewal framework and accelerating the pace of improvement in the months and years ahead. It is informed by the work, findings, and advice over the past decade of many analysts and organizations, including Achieve, McKinsey & Co., the Ohio Grantmakers Forum, the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Center on Education and the Economy, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and Ohio's own State Board of Education and Department of Education.

RECOMMENDATION I:

Create World-Class Standards and Stronger Accountability Mechanisms. Successful school systems hold schools, educators, and students accountable for their academic performance. The best systems in the world challenge their children with high standards and rigorous, equitable assessments. Ohio needs to build on its recent progress by aligning its K-12 standards with the knowledge and skills needed for success in postsecondary education and today's global economy and by benchmarking its standards against high-performing states and nations.

RECOMMENDATION II:

Ensure that Funding is Fairly Allocated Among All Children and Schools. To ensure that monies are allocated fairly, efficiently, and accountably, and are targeted at the differing needs of children, the current system should be replaced by a weighted funding plan wherein per-pupil amounts "weighted" according to the specific needs of individual youngsters follow them to the public schools they choose to attend.

RECOMMENDATION III:

Recruit the Best and Brightest to Lead Schools and Empower Them to Succeed. Ohio should recruit school leaders from many different professions and backgrounds. School districts should be encouraged

to look for proven leadership talent rather than paper credentials. These leaders should be fully empowered to lead their schools to new levels of performance. They should receive substantial bonuses for improving student achievement and their job tenure should be directly linked to school performance.

RECOMMENDATION IV:

Improve Teacher Quality. The evidence is overwhelming that quality teachers are the prime driver of student success. To improve Ohio's teaching force, we need to:

- Open the doors wide to talented college graduates and mid-careerists.
- Help good teachers become great.
- Create a competitive compensation system and sustainable retirement system.
- Empower school leaders to engage, deploy, compensate, develop, and retain top instructional talent.

RECOMMENDATION V:

Expand the Quality of, and Access to, a Range of High-Performing School Options. Ohio has created key elements of an array of diverse education options that parents and students want and that better meet the individual learning needs of children. The goal now must be to ensure that the quality of Ohio's school choices keeps pace with their quantity. That doesn't mean making them identical. Families want and children need schools that differ in calendar, academic emphasis, pedagogy, philosophy, technology, and much more. But all good schools use student achievement data to guide instruction and improve teaching. The state also needs to strengthen its capacity to overhaul and close schools (both charter and district-operated) that persistently fail to deliver results.

Introduction

Governor Ted Strickland has promised to unveil his education reform plan in early 2009. He is surely right that there is nothing more important to the state's economic future than strengthening its K-12 education system. Ohio's 21st century economic competitiveness depends on the quality of its schools.

In these pages, we at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, drawing on the wisdom, insights, analyses, and recommendations of many others, seek to inform the governor's education proposals, and the proposals and actions of other key Ohio policy makers and opinion leaders. We offer relevant examples of the best practices and thinking from across the nation and world as well as within the state. We are mindful, too, of the economic challenges facing Ohio, and the recommendations that follow seek to maximize the return on state education dollars by building on infrastructure and investments already in place.

We draw extensively on the past decade's work, of many analysts and organizations, including Achieve, McKinsey & Co., the Ohio Grantmakers Forum, the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Center on Education and the Economy, and Ohio's own State Board of Education and Department of Education, as well as prior Fordham studies.

We offer relevant examples of the best practices and thinking from across the nation and world as well as within the state. We are mindful, too, of the economic challenges facing Ohio, and the recommendations that follow seek to maximize the return on state education dollars by building on infrastructure and investments already in place.

Achievable Goals for Public Education

Ohioans of every background and political inclination agree that our state needs a system of public education that attains three critical goals: 1) maximizes the talents of every child; 2) is as strong as any in the world in overall achievement; and 3) closes the persistent academic gaps between rich and poor, black and white and brown.

Ohio's Education Policy Framework

Over the past decade or so, Ohio has (albeit in halting, imperfect, and incomplete ways) been moving down a path of school reform that points toward these three paramount goals. It has constructed, indeed

is still constructing, a competent policy framework for revitalizing and strengthening K-12 education in the Buckeye State. (The federal No Child Left Behind act has added urgency to this process.) This framework rests on 1) rigorous statewide academic standards, i.e. coherent statements of the skills and knowledge

Ohio's existing policy framework doesn't need to be replaced; rather its improvement and further development need to be accelerated.

that children in various grades are supposed to acquire; 2) assessments and other measures by which achievement and progress are gauged vis-à-vis those standards; 3) a host of interventions, re-constitutions, incentives, public awareness, and other "accountability" measures intended to strengthen those results; and 4) a widening menu of innovative schools (like STEM high schools)

and schools of choice, defined by operational freedom for those who lead them, choices for the families and children that attend them, and accountability for their results.

This policy framework resembles those used in high-performing countries (e.g., the Netherlands, Finland, Hong Kong) and states such as Massachusetts. Education Week analysts observed in 2006 that America's highest performing states show "evidence of a consistently positive relationship between achievement gains and the implementation of standards-based policies related to academic-content standards, aligned assessments, and accountability measures."¹ These efforts have been led and embraced by lawmakers from both sides of the aisle in state after state.

Ohio Has Made Progress, but More Needs to be Done

This approach has already yielded some welcome achievement gains in Ohio. For example, the state has shown progress on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP)—aka the Nation's Report Card—especially in math.² But no one could credibly argue that Ohio has yet created a world-class system of education. Despite signs of improvement, worrisome achievement gaps persist; for example, the white-black gap still exceeds 25 percentage points on NAEP tests.

Accelerating School Improvement in Ohio

The right course of action for Ohio, as for the nation as a whole, is to follow the lead of more successful countries and states that have persevered with standards-based reform (and choice-based reform) until they get it right. This is no time for a fundamental change of direction that would cast Ohio outside the national and international mainstream. Ohio's existing policy framework doesn't need to be replaced; rather its improvement and further development need to be accelerated. In this effort, a number of recent analyses should guide policy change. Specifically, three recent reports deserve close attention from the governor and other key policymakers.

Building on What Works

- The Achieve-commissioned and Gates-financed McKinsey & Co. report, *Creating a World-Class Education System in Ohio*, issued in February 2007.³
- *The Ohio Grantmakers Forum's Education for Ohio's Future*, issued in December 2006.⁴
- The State Board of Education's own consensus document, *A Vision for Transforming PK-12 Education in Ohio*, released in July 2008.

All three build on evidence of what works around the world and all three focus laser-like on creating a world-class system of education that maximizes the talents of all school-age Ohioans while narrowing pernicious achievement gaps. Building on their findings and advice, five recommendations follow to strengthen Ohio's present education policy framework and accelerate the pace of improvement in the months ahead. Through these means, Ohio will position itself to meet the tripartite goals of maximizing the talents of every child, developing a world-class system of education, and reducing achievement gaps.

RECOMMENDATION I:

CREATE WORLD-CLASS STANDARDS AND STRONGER ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

Successful school systems hold schools, educators, and students to account for their academic performance. Both McKinsey and the Ohio Grantmakers Forum strongly urge Ohio to improve upon its current system of academic standards, tests, and accountability. As noted in the McKinsey report, "Ohio has enacted several important education policy advances over the last decade with a focus on standards and accountability" that have:

- a) established academic content standards in English language arts, fine arts, foreign languages, mathematics, science, social studies, and technology; and
- b) established accountability systems for school districts and individual school buildings.

McKinsey: "Research indicates that the best systems in the world create a high challenge for their children that includes high standards and rigorous, equitable assessments. This will require Ohio to go beyond the strong progress in this area over the last ten years by aligning K-12 standards with knowledge and skills needed for success in postsecondary education and the global economy and by benchmarking its standards against those of high-performing states and especially nations that compete with the United States."

Ohio also implemented the Ohio Core legislation in early 2007, requiring all students, beginning with the freshman class of 2010, to complete a rigorous core curriculum as a requirement for admission into most of Ohio's four-year, state-assisted institutions of higher education.

Instead of resting on these laurels, however, McKinsey urged Ohio to move faster, “Research indicates that the best systems in the world create a high challenge for their children that includes high standards and rigorous, equitable assessments. This will require Ohio to go beyond the strong progress in this area over the last ten years by aligning K-12 standards with knowledge and skills needed for success in postsecondary education and the global economy and by benchmarking its standards against those of high-performing states and especially nations that compete with the United States.”

Few can claim that Ohio has “world-class academic standards” today. The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation’s State of State Standards reports conferred on Ohio’s standards a C average in 2000⁶ and a D+ in 2006.⁷ But the state has shown a steady commitment to standards-based education and to improving its content standards. Ohio has also participated in well-regarded national efforts such as the American Diploma Project to create college- and career-ready standards. McKinsey, the Ohio Grantmakers Forum (OGF), and the State Board of Education have all urged a continued focus on improving the state’s standards. That’s the right starting point for any serious education-reform package.

OGF urged Ohio to benchmark its standards to 21st century skills and expectations. The State Board of Education and McKinsey also both recommended that Ohio benchmark its standards against those of high-performing states (e.g., Massachusetts, Indiana) and nations. Ohio should continue working closely with the American Diploma Project, Achieve, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Governors Association, and kindred efforts to push its academic standards toward world-class quality. The state should set the goal, and provide the resources necessary to achieve it, of having world-class academic content standards in place within a few years.

Ohio’s accountability system is also improving, if too slowly. The state was one of the first to measure both student proficiency (do students know the expected material?), and student growth (also known as “value added,” i.e., how much have students grown in skills and knowledge over the course of a school year?). (More on value-added can be found in *Ohio Value-Added Primer* at www.edexcellence.net.) However, as summarized in a national 2007 report by Fordham and the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), Ohio generally does not set a high standard for student proficiency. The Proficiency Illusion found that “the difficulty of Ohio’s proficiency cut scores in reading and math is generally below the median, compared to the other 25 states in the study.”⁸

In other words, Ohio’s recent progress has been made against fairly low expectations. If the state is serious about “best in the world” education, its definition of proficiency must rise and its definition of adequacy, much less excellence, at the school and district level must be more than the current goal of 75 percent of students meeting minimum requirements. This means moving forward with improvements to the current

system. For example, McKinsey recommended eventually supplanting the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) with “end-of-course exams” in the Ohio Core subjects.

In a partnership with Stanford University, the Ohio Department of Education has received funding from the Gates Foundation to develop and pilot standards-based performance assessment systems for the Buckeye State, and this effort to create and implement internationally-benchmarked education standards and performance-based assessments should be intensified. Additionally, led by the efforts of Chancellor Eric Fingerhut, Ohio is moving to align its high school graduation requirements to college and workplace expectations through the efforts of the College- and Career-Ready Policy Institute. The state is also collaborating with Achieve’s American Diploma Project, Jobs for the Future, the Data Quality Partnership, and the National Governors Association, once again supported in this venture by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

RECOMMENDATION II:

ENSURE THAT FUNDING IS FAIRLY ALLOCATED AMONG ALL CHILDREN AND SCHOOLS

Most observers would agree with OGF’s 2006 conclusion that, “Despite improvements, Ohio’s current funding system still does not – and cannot – ensure stability, equity, or appropriate growth, and local districts are not accountable for spending tax dollars wisely.” McKinsey noted that “Financial support for principals, teachers, and students is the bedrock of the system, but it is well established that Ohio’s school funding system is broken.” School funding has been one of the most contentious education (and political) issues in the state since at least 1997. On multiple occasions, the state Supreme Court declared the state’s funding system unconstitutional. In response, the legislature made several rounds of repairs. In 1997, the General Assembly set up the state’s school facilities funding program, which has already spent more than \$5 billion on new schools. Poor districts were first in line for these dollars. In 2001, the General Assembly created the Parity Aid program that earmarked more state dollars for the poorest districts. In 2005, the state implemented Poverty-Based Assistance to direct funds to programs and services that contribute to increased academic achievement among disadvantaged pupils.

Ohio Grantmakers Forum: “Despite improvements, Ohio’s current funding system still does not - and cannot - ensure stability, equity, or appropriate growth, and local districts are not accountable for spending tax dollars wisely.”

Through these efforts, Ohio has made praiseworthy gains in closing the resource-equity gap between its richest and poorest districts. These gains are shown in ratings from national groups like Editorial Projects in Ed-

ucation and the Education Trust. In its 2008 Funding Gap report, for example, the Education Trust cites Ohio as one of just ten states that have successfully reduced the gaps between low- and high-poverty districts.⁹

Despite such progress, however, serious inequities remain – between districts to some extent, but particularly among schools within districts—and among different kinds of public schools. The McKinsey Report, the Ohio Grantmakers Forum, the School Funding Subcommittee of the Ohio State Board of Education, and the Fordham Institute agree on key elements of a school funding fix.

To ensure that monies are allocated fairly, efficiently, and accountably and are targeted at the differing needs of children, the current system should be replaced by a weighted funding plan wherein per-pupil

Weighted Student Funding allocates in a more equitable and effective fashion whatever resources are available.

amounts “weighted” according to the specific needs of individual youngsters follow them to the public schools they choose to attend. By devolving most financial decision-making to principals, districts would become school-support entities that provide such important services as financial management, trans-

portation, special education services, etc. Increased transparency in public reporting would help state policymakers gauge the true price of a world-class education and ensure that taxpayer dollars are spent prudently and productively. This form of “Weighted Student Funding” represents a fundamental shift in public-education finance and redirects money from paying for programs, buildings, and administrative staff at district headquarters toward paying for the education of children in the classrooms where they sit.

Weighted Student Funding allocates in a more equitable and effective fashion whatever resources are available. It could be implemented at current spending levels, although that would result in some schools receiving less money than they currently do. The only way to avoid having “losers” is to add new money to the system during the transition – essentially, guaranteeing that no district or school will be worse off (in the short term) than under the old funding system. The prospect of new money may seem like a “deal breaker” to many policymakers, considering Ohio’s parlous fiscal climate. Yet history shows that such transitions can be paid for over time. Over the last 25 years, Ohio has added an average of \$760 million per year to K-12 education. In no year since 1981 has education spending risen by less than \$376 million. As a result, the overall picture is one of new money flowing fairly steadily – and notably faster than inflation.¹⁰

If new money is to be injected into the system, where is it to come from? McKinsey recommends that Ohio “reform its tax system to deliver the funding for the redesigned [weighted] formula to each school on a predictable and stable basis. This would reduce the number of local levies that districts must ask for each year and reduce inequalities in district revenue. This would inevitably involve a stronger role for the state. Finally, Ohio should establish a process to periodically update and revise its formula.”

RECOMMENDATION III:

RECRUIT THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST TO LEAD SCHOOLS AND EMPOWER THEM TO SUCCEED

If Ohio is to have world-class schools, those schools must have great leaders in key leadership positions. To get such leaders, Ohio should open its gates and welcome people from many different directions to enter them, minimize the hoops and hurdles and regulatory hassles, seek demonstrated talent rather than paper credentials, and pay these folks what the CEO of a small company deserves. The Los Angeles philanthropist and business leader Eli Broad captured this in 2003 when he wrote: “This is serious, urgent business – the business of providing a world-class education to every student in every classroom in every school in every district. We must get it done...Our nation’s education system needs more highly qualified leaders – from all walks of life...Rather than create bureaucratic barriers to entry, we should focus on strategic

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recruitment, induction and measures to hold leaders accountable for results once they are hired.”¹¹ Innovative programs such as New Leaders for New Schools have been working with reform-minded districts like Baltimore, New Orleans, New York City, Chicago, Memphis, and Washington, DC to place top talent in the neediest public schools.

Seeking talented individuals to lead schools will, of course, only impact student achievement if they are properly empowered to lead their schools to new levels of performance. Citing New York City as a model, McKinsey recommends giving principals authority over hiring and staffing decisions, school budgets, and instructional choices such as curriculum. In return, they are held to account for student outcomes. New York City already has a version of this approach, one in which principals receive substantial bonuses for improving student achievement, and their job tenure is also on the line, linked to school performance.¹²

Results-based education means holding principals to a high standard for their schools’ academic results; installing clear indicators to measure each school’s progress; and equipping the school’s leader with the au-

thority to pursue those results as he or she thinks best. But it's a conditional freedom that lasts only so long as it truly yields results. Principals who succeed should be retained, renewed, and rewarded. Those who fail to measure up after a reasonable period should go. To repeat, it is only realistic to hold principals to account in this way if they truly possess the authority to lead their schools, notably in the key areas of budget, personnel, and instruction.

McKinsey notes that, when giving principals authority to make decisions related to how their schools operate, professional development must support that role: "Districts should provide principals the time, resources, and authority to lead a transition [to a world-class education system] that the State can support with targeted resources." Ohio's Principal Evaluation System, being piloted now in several districts, is an important step in the right direction and the state would be wise to build on this effort led by the University of Cincinnati. Additionally, McKinsey suggests that it will be necessary to provide financial incentives to compensate these new-style principals for their added responsibility and accountability.

RECOMMENDATION IV: IMPROVE TEACHER QUALITY

The evidence is overwhelming that quality teachers are the prime driver of student success. The OGF report captures this when it asserts that to "be competitive nationally and internationally, we need the best and brightest teachers working in all of our classrooms with all of our students." Getting top talent into teaching, however, is only part of the challenge. To improve Ohio's teaching force, the state needs also to:

The average SAT score of a TFA recruit is 1321, versus 1017 nationally and 1074 for recent graduates of Ohio colleges of education.

- Open the doors wide to talented college graduates and mid-careerists.
- Help good teachers become great.
- Create a competitive compensation system and sustainable retirement system.
- Empower school leaders to engage, deploy, compensate, develop, and retain instructional talent.

Open the doors to talent. A disproportionate share of Ohio's teachers comes from among the less able among high school students who go to college. By contrast, programs like Teach for America attract outstanding graduates to teach in some of the country's toughest schools. (The average SAT score of a TFA recruit is 1321, versus 1017 nationally¹³ and 1074 for recent graduates of Ohio colleges of education.¹⁴) Ohio should seek to attract more top college graduates into its teaching ranks through partnerships with groups like Teach for America and The New Teachers Project, and it should look at creating state-based efforts of its own. Private philanthropy can play an important role in helping launch such efforts.

Recruiting talented newcomers is part of the solution. Astute use of mid-careerists is another. Currently, however, anyone educated outside colleges of education can only obtain an Ohio teaching license in a few fields. Ohio would benefit from expanding alternative licensure to cover all subjects and grade levels, while also providing more robust mentoring and practical in-classroom training found in the best traditional preparation programs.

Help good teachers become great. Once teachers are in the classroom, they need ongoing professional support. McKinsey identifies common characteristics in the teacher-performance-management plans of top-performing schools. Such schools set high but clear expectations for teachers based on the components of effective teaching and appropriate measures of student achievement. They use rigorous and consistent evaluative tools to assess performance and provide feedback to teachers about their students' achievement. And they arm teachers with high-quality professional development to improve their craft. The state's *Standards for Ohio Educators* should serve as the basis for any evaluation tool (these standards are currently recommended—but not required—for use in the state's public schools), and Ohio can build on its existing teacher mentoring programs to support novice and seasoned teachers alike.

Ohio has a mentoring component built into its Entry Year Teacher program for new traditional-pathway teachers. Mentoring is also supposed to be provided for teachers who come through alternative routes, but this doesn't always happen. The state should provide the same robust mentoring for all new teachers and expand it to include more experienced teachers. High-performing teachers should be empowered to support the development of their struggling colleagues.

National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE): "recruit from the top third of the high school graduates going on to college for the next generation of school teachers."

Ohio can build on its Teacher Advancement Program (TAP), a rigorous collaborative professional development program that includes a performance-based pay component.¹⁵ The Ohio Department of Education has funded a handful of TAP schools, which focus laser-like on student achievement and are highly data driven. South High School in Columbus, for instance, is a TAP school. It was one of the lowest performing schools in the district but since joining TAP has made steady achievement gains.

Create a competitive compensation system and sustainable retirement system. As noted by the state's own Educator Standards Board, "Teachers who excel, as demonstrated by their classroom practices and their students' achievement, receive the same salary as teachers who demonstrate little in terms of student achievement gains."¹⁶ Like most other states, Ohio's teacher compensation system is designed to reward seniority and time in service. Instead, teacher performance should drive compensation and advancement.

As recommended by the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) in its seminal report *Tough Choices for Tough Times*, states should aim to “recruit from the top third of the high school graduates going on to college for the next generation of school teachers.”¹⁷ To attract and have a shot at keeping these top graduates, Ohio needs to change a teacher compensation system that today is backloaded: weak

Ohio Grantmakers Forum: “Streamline the process to remove chronically ineffective educators.”

on actual salary, especially up front, but heavy on pensions and health benefits for retirees. Thus, new teachers are paid poorly but promised a generous defined pension if they stick it out for 25 or 30 years. In Ohio, fully a quarter of all teachers leave the classroom in their first five years of teaching, and as a result they

benefit little from the state’s retirement system.¹⁸ The NCEE urges states to move away from such defined-benefit pension systems toward what the best private-sector firms provide: individual, portable, defined-contribution retirement plans.

As noted by economists Robert Costrell and Michael Podgursky in their 2007 study of Ohio’s State Teachers Retirement System (STRS), such a compensation system would achieve two ends. First, the portability and equity of retirement benefits would entice mid-career professionals to go into teaching and the best and brightest young people to become educators, knowing that their retirement plan would follow them to future jobs and other locations. Second, the cost savings would allow schools to offer more competitive wages to teachers, including new teachers.¹⁹ NCEE estimates that such change would “enable the nation to pay beginning teachers about \$45,000 per year...and to pay about \$95,000 per year to the typical teachers working at the top of new career ladders for a regular teaching year and as much as \$110,000 per year to teachers willing to work the same hours per year as other professionals do.” In exchange for greater pay and more professional responsibilities, teachers would forego tenure and staffing decisions would be based on a school’s needs and a teacher’s performance.

The state should also reward high-performing teachers by linking compensation to merit through a career ladder, as recommended by McKinsey. A career ladder would increase Ohio’s ability to leverage and reward teachers’ expertise by providing teachers with new professional responsibilities without leaving the classroom altogether. Ohio’s Educator Standards Board has proposed a “statewide career ladder”²⁰ and both McKinsey and OGF recommend its further development and implementation. Ohio should take up OGF’s additional recommendation that the state should “promote pay-for-performance strategies based on well-researched evaluation criteria (including value-added analysis).”

Obviously, Ohio should not break its promises to current educators. Veteran teachers who wish to retain their current tenure and benefits should be free to do so, and teachers currently paying into Ohio’s defined-contribution retirement system should be allowed to remain there if they wish. But the basic system would be rethought for incoming educators and for veterans who voluntarily agree to make the change.

Empower principals to create varied learning environments. Top-performing school systems set clear expectations for teachers and hold teachers to account for meeting these expectations. In the best of these systems, teacher expectations drive teacher evaluations and link rewards and penalties to the results of evaluations.

Ohio's principals should be empowered to select, deploy, compensate, and retain their schools' teachers. The state should set clear expectations for its teachers and put in place the tools for principals to evaluate their performance against these expectations. In dealing with underperforming teachers, McKinsey recommends that they first receive intensive intervention and mentoring. However, chronically low-performing teachers should receive escalating penalties, including "demotions, deferred salary progression, mandatory remedial training, or, in the most severe cases, termination." OGF urges the state to "streamline the process to remove chronically ineffective educators." Principals should have the authority to identify and deal with underperforming teachers just as they should identify and reward top-performers. At the same time, principals and district administrators must be made better aware of their right under current law not to renew the contract of any teacher working under a provisional license (in his or her first few years of teaching) without cause.

RECOMMENDATION V:

EXPAND THE QUALITY OF, AND ACCESS TO, A RANGE OF HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOL OPTIONS

Both McKinsey and OGF advocate giving Ohio students and families access to high quality public-school choices, both inside and outside traditional systems. OGF observed that "innovation and choice have driven improvements in virtually every sector of the American economy, from health care and energy to technology and bioscience... The traditional educational model of one-size-fits-all does not meet the interests and learning needs of our increasingly diverse student population." Simply put, we need more schools and school options that align instructional methods to actual student needs. School choice is increasingly becoming a fact of life for many children and families. Nationally, more than 30 percent of children attend schools other than their assigned neighborhood public school; fully 34 percent of public school students in Ohio's "Big 8" districts attend a school other than their neighborhood school.

Ohio has created a number of school options that parents and students want and that better meet the individual learning needs of children. These already include district-operated magnet schools and alternative programs; STEM high schools and Early College Academies; regional vocational schools; community schools (a.k.a. charter schools); and a publicly funded voucher program for children trapped in persistently failing public schools. The last decade has seen the emergence of a number of innovative schools. For example, about 22,000 Ohio students attend e-schools, based on-line rather than in school buildings.

Indeed, this is the faster growing segment of the new schools sector in Ohio, with more than 30 such schools being opened by school districts and others by independent operators. It is clear that the power of information and communication technologies and on-line learning to improve and customize learning

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“50 percent of all courses in grades 9-12 will
be taken online by 2019.”

for children is accelerating. If this sector is encouraged in coming years, it will lead to powerful educational innovations, exciting partnerships between classroom-based and on-line learning, and increased 24/7 learning opportunities for the state’s children. The National

Center for Education Statistics estimates that “50 percent of all courses in grades 9-12 will be taken online by 2019.”²¹

The genie of school choice isn’t going back inside the bottle, if only because family mobility cum technology make it unstoppable. The emerging marketplace of schools in Ohio, however, is shadowed by huge variability in quality. The goal now must be to ensure that the quality of school choices keeps pace with their quantity. We know what high-quality choices look like. Some of the top-performing urban schools in Ohio are district-operated magnet schools (e.g., Withrow University High School in Cincinnati, Stivers in Dayton, the Columbus Alternative High School in Columbus, and the John Hay Campus High School in Cleveland); while other high-performers are charter schools (e.g., DECA in Dayton, the Graham School in Columbus, Citizens Academy in Cleveland, the Phoenix Academy in Cincinnati, and the online Ohio Virtual Academy).

Their examples are important for all public schools. School districts are starting to incorporate some of their ideas. Some utilize extended learning opportunities through longer years and/or days. Others have all-day kindergarten, and some offer pre-school programs for three and four year-olds. These innovative district and charter schools customize learning for their students through varied academic programs and use value-added student achievement data to guide instruction and improve teaching. These schools also hold themselves, their teachers, and their students to account for results.

The genie of school choice isn’t going back inside the bottle, if only because family mobility cum technology make it unstoppable. The emerging marketplace of schools in Ohio, however, is shadowed by huge variability in quality.

Yet not all schools of choice are nearly as good as they should be. McKinsey noted that too many children are exposed to “market risk” from bad schools. At the same time, McKinsey and OGF agree, the promise of choice is limited by regulations that keep community schools from competing on a level playing field with their traditional counterparts. McKinsey, OGF, and other thoughtful observers recommend creating a common accountability framework for all schools of choice.

This would limit market risk by ensuring that would-be school operators are carefully vetted in advance; that all schools are thoroughly monitored and evaluated by responsible authorities; and that poor performers exit the market in a timely fashion or get thoroughly reconstituted. Ohio needs dramatically to beef up its screening of potential school operators so that only those with strong promise of superior academic performance open new schools or take over troubled schools. (Can anyone really believe, for example, that all thirty of the autumn '08 crop of new charter schools have what it takes to produce educational success? Yet well-meaning—or greedy—operators continue to open them and well-meaning—or greedy—authorizers continue to approve them.)

The state also needs to strengthen its ability to close schools (both charter and district-operated) that persistently struggle financially and/or academically. Deeply troubled schools cannot be allowed to languish for years.

The state also needs to strengthen its ability to close schools (both charter and district-operated) that persistently struggle financially and/or academically. Deeply troubled schools cannot be allowed to languish for years. Ohio has made progress on this front in recent years, but the 2006 report *Turning the Corner to Quality* by the Fordham Institute, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, and the National Association of Charter School Authorizers provided recommendations for doing considerably more on this front.²²

Finally, as recommended by McKinsey, the state should actively recruit really strong school operators from around the nation and world to open new schools (e.g., KIPP in Columbus) and turn around troubled ones. As schools of choice improve, restrictions on their growth and expansion should be eased. Building on the policy of Weighted Student Funding, high-performing schools of choice should receive funding levels equal to traditional district schools and should gain access to state school facility dollars.

Conclusion

Ohio's system of public education has made slow but welcome improvements over the past decade. The state's present policy framework is starting to pay dividends, and the groundwork has been laid for faster improvements in the future. Yet Ohio has much farther to go to be considered world-class and to meet the needs of all its children. This paper has outlined five keys for quality education. If Ohio embraces these policies, it can become a national leader in public education. As Governor Strickland has repeatedly noted, the state's economic vitality and social health are directly connected to the performance of its schools. The proposals outlined here will help to ensure the revitalization of Ohio, its economy, and its people in the years to come.

About the Institute

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute believes that all children deserve a high quality K-12 education at the school of their choice. Nationally and in our home state of Ohio, with special emphasis on our hometown of Dayton, we conduct research, issue publications, and direct action projects in elementary/secondary education reform. The Institute is affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

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Endnotes

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