



State Board of Education Public Comment
Alison Paxson, Children's Defense Fund-Ohio
December 14, 2021

Board President McGuire, Vice President Dackin, and members of Ohio's State Board of Education, my name is Alison Paxson, I am Policy and Communications Associate for the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio (CDF-Ohio), and I appreciate the opportunity to provide public comment during today's meeting.

Born out of the civil rights movement, with more than four decades of advocacy in Ohio, the Children's Defense Fund champions policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, and ensure their access to appropriate and targeted health care, quality education, and nutritional wellness.

As an organization, we are committed to being a strong, effective, and independent voice for all children who have no vote, no lobbyist, and no voice in the halls of power. We are therefore here on behalf of Ohio's nearly 1.7 million school children to urge this Board to consider the following two key items when determining the best candidate for the role of State Superintendent of Public Instruction:

1. The ideal candidate must prioritize "whole child" data- and equity-driven approaches to public instruction.

During the August State Board of Education meeting, there was a motion to remove reference to the state's strategic plan, [*Each Child, Our Future*](#), as a commitment for the interim superintendent. I question why that action was taken – particularly given that this plan was developed by more than 150 Ohio-based partners in a transparent process that included feedback from 1,200 Ohio citizens – parents, educators, business leaders, lawmakers, students, and community members who, in articulating a vision for all children to be successful and to thrive in K-12 and beyond, agreed that the "whole child" must be centered squarely in our state's education plan.

All Ohio children deserve equitable, high-quality educations with opportunities for bright futures, but the fact is that this not currently the reality for all children, especially Black and brown children and for students experiencing poverty. According to Ohio Report Card data, barriers to educational attainment persist and disparities in educational indicators have widened over the last school year. For instance, the data tells us that 1 in 2 Black children missed more than 10% of the school year and that students who qualify as economically disadvantaged were more than 3 times as likely to be chronically absent (37.5%) as their wealthier peers (11%). For too many students, disproportionate access to health care, nutrition,



technology, stable housing, economic stability, and other basic needs have limited their “whole child” wellbeing and therefore, their preparedness and ability to learn.

CDF-Ohio recognizes the work of the State Board of Education, the Ohio Department of Education and partners in other state agencies, Ohio’s school districts, as well as our local communities and families who, in recent years, have engaged in creating sustained and impactful progress to address the needs of the “whole child”. However, continued prioritization of this work is a critically important undertaking that must be reflected in the commitments of our next Superintendent.

2. The ideal candidate must also be committed to maintaining Ohio’s K-12 Social Emotional Learning (SEL) standards.

In 2019, Ohio’s State Board of Education adopted voluntary K-12 social-emotional learning (SEL) standards, ones that were developed in partnership with Ohio teachers, counselors, and experts, again, in a transparent, stakeholder-driven process.

Social emotional learning competencies help children to learn and grow every day – by equipping them with self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, decision-making, and what we call “life skills” more generally – and these same skills importantly [also help young people to navigate stress, uncertainty, crisis, and indeed the complex realities that have complicated their daily lives before, but especially since, the pandemic began](#). Indeed, if well-designed, high-quality, and implemented with equity in mind – the reasons why our standards are so important – SEL programs have been well-documented through data and research to improve educational attainment and learning, long-term health and wellness outcomes, community and civic engagement, and workforce readiness. (Along with my public comment I have attached [a report](#) we published this year citing this research.) The economic imperative is also indisputable – a [2015 study](#) found that an average return on investment was \$11 for every \$1 spent on SEL programs in schools.

There is a saying: “You get hired on the hard skills and fired on the soft skills.” Youth and young adults who are self aware, able to self-regulate their emotions, and capable of working well with others are more likely to be successful in the workforce, in higher education, their personal relationships, and in life. That’s what every parent wants for their child, what every employer wants from their workforce, and what community members want from their neighbors. Ohio’s next superintendent must be committed to quality SEL in our schools.

I welcome any questions you may have for me and my comments today, and I truly appreciate the opportunity to speak towards the qualities that are important for determining the next State Superintendent of Public Instruction continues. Thank you.