

Testimony to Senator Sherrod Brown at the field hearing for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

I am Steve Jackson, senior vice president of the Great Oaks Institute of Technology and Career Development. I'd like to thank Senator Brown for the opportunity to discuss the success that our district has had in preparing students for careers and college. I'd also like to thank our hosts at Metro High School—both for making this hearing possible and for the work you do on behalf of Ohio students.

Let me tell you a bit about Great Oaks. We are a public school district providing career and technical education programs for students in 36 school districts in southwestern Ohio. As one of the largest such districts in the United States, we serve urban, rural, and suburban students with more than 40 different career and technical programs on four campuses. Each year, more than 12,000 high school students enroll in our workforce development and career foundation education programs. We also coordinate career education services for about 120,000 K-12 students, and provide career programs and other services for more than 50,000 adults annually.

Students come to us for a variety of reasons. Some are focused on their future and want to begin studying a field that interests them. Others have not been successful in their present high school, and want a fresh start. Some know that they learn better in a hands-on, focused setting. Some of our students are among

the best in their class academically and see that Great Oaks offers them new challenges and opportunities.

Great Oaks was formed in the early 1970s to provide career and technical programs for the region. This was done so that together, school districts could offer their students highly specialized programs that they didn't have space or funding to provide by themselves. Over the years our programs have changed as the community's workforce needs have changed. Typing, keypunch, and data entry classes have given way to biotechnology, robotics, and digital and interactive media programs.

While in school, it's important that our students gain real-world experience. Co-ops, internships, and apprenticeships give Great Oaks students the chance to work side-by-side with professionals in the field. Those opportunities can give them an advantage when they graduate, too. For example, a joint project with the Independent Electrical Contractors of Greater Cincinnati allows students to complete the first two years of a four-year electrician apprenticeship by the time they finish high school.

Students earn industry credentials and certifications as they complete Great Oaks programs. A high school student can graduate with a practical nursing license or EMT certification. A student can be certified as a professional firefighter, dental assistant, heating and air conditioning technician, welder, or animal care technician. These certifications and credentials validate the preparation their

education provided for them to begin a high-paying, in-demand career immediately.

If all we did for our students was to give them a solid foundation for a career, we would be considered successful. A year after leaving us, about 92% of our graduates are working in their career field, continuing their education, or are in the military.

But the 21st century demands that students be prepared for both careers and college. To that end, one improvement in career and technical education is the increased emphasis on more rigorous, integrated academics. General math and science classes have evolved into advanced algebra, calculus, microbiology, and anatomy. Competencies are aligned with the Ohio Department of Education standards as well as industry certifications and post-secondary requirements.

Creating this foundation of rigorous academic classes is the first step in preparing students for college. The next is to break down perceptual and financial barriers that our students may face. For example, many of our students arrive at our door not knowing how to make college a reality. We provide a setting in which students can achieve and one in which they find themselves doing college-level work while still in high school. In fact, through 172 articulation agreements with community colleges, four-year universities, and other institutions our students can step directly into post-secondary education having earned as many as 50 credit hours for the advanced work done in their career program.

Students also have opportunities to earn college credit in some core academic classes through a dual enrollment program. Curriculum is developed that meets college standards, Great Oaks teachers are certified as adjunct college faculty, and students can earn transcribed credit valid at any Ohio college or university.

So our students learn that they can—and do—achieve at a college level. The perception they have of their future changes.

But I also mentioned breaking down financial barriers. The college credit earned saves them and their parents thousands of dollars individually. In fact, last year alone students earned more than 2,500 credit hours through the dual enrollment program. That represents nearly a million dollars in tuition saved, based on Ohio tuition rates.

The result is that currently about 50% of our graduates go directly to post-secondary education.

We also provide second chances to those who have left high school. Our Gateway to Success program is a nationally-recognized program which helps young adults who have dropped out from their high school earn a high school diploma. It's a unique program for two reasons: First, those students can actually earn a diploma from the school district they originally left. Second, Gateway to Success is located on several area college campuses, which allows students to experience the college environment. In less than three years, more than 200 young adults have graduated through Gateway to Success. Even more noteworthy is that

about half of these students who thought they wouldn't even finish high school have since gone on to college.

Preparing students for success in careers and college can only happen through partnerships with others within the community. I mentioned the partnerships with colleges and universities that provide our students with articulated and transcribed college credit, and which has helped us to develop a college-level academic curriculum.

Equally important are partnerships with business and industry. By working closely with our partners we understand and anticipate the workforce development needs of our community. The programs we offer evolve as the economy evolves.

So, based on labor market needs, we design and offer new programs. Once we begin to develop a program, we create strong links with leaders in that field. The career-technical curriculum is designed with their support and assistance, and the labs are equipped based on their recommendations. Each of our programs has an ongoing advisory council to keep our instructors firmly connected to the industry. Those links are valuable, too, as our students look for apprenticeship, internship, and co-op opportunities.

One area that has received much attention from educators recently is the concept of 21st century skills. Business and post-secondary leaders tell us that successful graduates must be able to work collaboratively, solve complex problems, use

technology, and be flexible in their education. The nature of career and technical education is that students are already learning those skills in their career labs. Again, I appreciate the chance to give an overview of career and college readiness from the Great Oaks and career-technical perspective. By anticipating emerging needs and partnering with others in the community to create programs and pathways with value, we are able to provide an education that creates options and opportunities for our graduates.

Thank you for your time.