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134th General Assembly

Fiscal Note & Local Impact Statement

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Version: As Introduced

Primary Sponsor: Sen. Blessing

Local Impact Statement Procedure Required: No

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Highlights

- The bill permits school districts and other public schools to elect to implement or discontinue blended learning for the current 2021-2022 school year by April 30, 2022, rather than July 1, 2021, as under current law. Any costs associated with the bill's operating requirements for districts and schools opting to do so for this school year are permissive and may vary widely depending on the district or school's circumstances and implementation decisions.
- Few traditional school districts are currently using a blended learning model. Those that are or have done so thus far this school year have operated them in limited circumstances.

Detailed Analysis

Blended learning requirements for the 2021-2022 school year

Continuing law permits school districts and other public schools to operate using a blended learning model, in which a student spends at least 51% of instructional time at school and the remainder of instructional time engaged in online learning. Current law requires that districts and schools opting or ceasing to use a blended learning model submit a declaration to the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) by July 1 of each school year.

For the current 2021-2022 school year only, the bill permits school districts and other public schools to submit a blended learning declaration to ODE by April 30, 2022, providing additional flexibility for school districts to respond to changing conditions surrounding the coronavirus pandemic. However, the bill requires schools or districts that choose to implement a blended learning model during any portion of the 2021-2022 school year to adhere to specific operating requirements, such as providing internet access and devices necessary to access online

content to each student participating in blended learning. The bill declares an emergency and, thus, goes into immediate effect.

Various data compiled by ODE suggests that many traditional school districts want the flexibility for blended learning this year, but few are currently implementing it. Those that are operating a blended learning model or have implemented one at some point this school year generally have done so in limited circumstances. Specifically, while 398 (65%) traditional school districts submitted a blended learning declaration by July 1, 2021, under current law, ODE identified two districts that are actually using a mix of in-person and remote education for some students as of September 23, 2021. These hybrid situations are usually used for a certain grade or building and for a limited period of time, typically one week or so. All other traditional school districts reported using a five-day in-person format of instruction.¹ In addition to the traditional districts, 30 of the 49 joint vocational school districts as well as 15 community and STEM schools, the Ohio State School for the Blind, and the Ohio School for the Deaf submitted a blended learning declaration for this school year. ODE does not publish what type of education model these other types of public schools are currently using. It may be that, like the traditional districts, most if not all of these schools submitted a declaration to provide the flexibility for blended learning this school year in case it becomes necessary.

Permissive costs for districts opting for blended learning

The operating standards for blended learning required by continuing law require each school district to adopt policies and procedures that, among other items, address (a) the method by which each participating student will have access to the digital learning tools necessary to access online or digital content, (b) the assessment of student progress, and (c) the assignment of a sufficient number of teachers to ensure the student has an appropriate level of interaction with a teacher to meet the student's personal learning goals. The bill requires, for the 2021-2022 school year only, that school districts opting for blended learning during any portion of that school year provide internet access and devices necessary to access online content to each student participating in blended learning, monitor and assess student achievement and progress and provide additional services if necessary to improve student achievement, and periodically communicate with parents or guardians regarding student progress.

Costs to districts or schools that elect to participate in blended learning during FY 2022 under the bill will depend on the number of students within those districts who participate in blended learning and the circumstances of individual districts and students. Note that school districts and other public schools may use federal coronavirus school relief funds to purchase educational technology, including hardware, software, and connectivity.²

¹ Ohio Department of Education. "Back to School 2021-2022," <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Back-to-School>, last accessed September 27, 2021.

² U.S. Department of Education. "Frequently Asked Questions: Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Programs, Governor's Emergency Education Relief Programs, May 2021," pg. 41. The document is accessible online at the U.S. Department of Education [website](#).

Devices

Most districts already provide some students with devices to access online content. If a district elects to provide blended learning, the cost to provide devices to students will vary based on the district's existing supply of devices, the number of students who participate in blended learning, and the district's implementation decisions. For example, all eight major urban school districts in Ohio have one-to-one device-to-student policies. Suburban, small town, and rural districts have a variety of policies, with most providing devices for students who need one and several districts with one-to-one device-to-student policies. If a district needs to purchase devices, the cost for a Chromebook, for example, generally starts at around a few hundred dollars per device.

Internet access

The bill does not specify where a district opting for blended learning must provide internet access to a student. Districts may be able to comply with the bill at no additional cost by providing access to school Wi-Fi somewhere on premises for students engaged in blended learning (for example, schools could provide blended learners access to places such as a cafeteria, auditorium, or gymnasium). The bill also does not specify whether or not districts opting for blended learning must pay for internet access to participating students with existing internet access at home. Some schools already provide free internet access to students or partner with local companies to provide free or reduced cost internet access to students' homes. If districts need to provide internet access to all households with participating students, basic internet access can cost up to \$50 per month per household. Many students already have internet access at home. A January 2021 ODE survey of school districts indicated that 83% of K-12 students had broadband access or a cellular connection from home (3% of K-12 students had no connection from home and districts were unsure about access for 14% of K-12 students).³ It appears that district implementation decisions will impact the cost of providing internet access to blended learners.

Other blended learning requirements

The bill also requires a school or district that implements a blended learning model to monitor and assess student achievement and progress, provide additional services if necessary, and periodically communicate with parents or guardians regarding student progress. These requirements are similar to work currently performed by teachers and school staff and are not expected to have a fiscal impact. However, the bill may increase the administrative workload for school districts and other public schools opting to use blended learning under the bill to comply with certain reporting requirements. Such districts and schools must report to ODE the total number of students engaged in blended learning by grade level and the total number of students with disabilities engaged in blended learning by grade level by March 15, 2022, for the 2021-2022 school year.

³ Ohio Department of Education. "Data Insights: Ohio Students' Technology Connectivity and Technology Access," <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Reset-and-Restart/Data-Insights-Ohio-Students-Internet-Connectivity>, last accessed September 27, 2021.

Department of Education provisions

The bill increases ODE's administrative workload by requiring that it post a list of districts and schools operating under a blended learning model and by modifying the state report cards for the 2021-2022 school year to prohibit the use of the chronic absenteeism measure. It appears that ODE can comply with both provisions using existing resources. ODE currently posts a similar list of district education delivery model policies, which is referenced above.

Delivery of services for students with disabilities

The bill permits individuals who hold a valid license issued by a licensing board to provide services to students with disabilities via electronic delivery method or telehealth communication upon the request of the student's parent or guardian between July 1, 2021, and December 31, 2021. These provisions apply to any student participating in the Autism or the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship programs, or to any student who was enrolled in a public or chartered nonpublic school and was receiving those types of services, regardless of the method of delivery, prior to the bill's effective date. The bill additionally prohibits a licensing board from taking any disciplinary action against a license holder who provides services to qualifying students. Similar provisions have been in effect since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic through the end of the 2020-2021 school year and Medicaid currently covers these services when they are delivered via telehealth, so no additional fiscal effect is expected from the provisions of the bill.