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EXCELLENT EDUCATION

Testimony of Bob Wise, President of the Alliance for Excellent Education and Former Governor of West Virginia, Before the Senate Education Committee, State of Michigan Wednesday, May 23, 2012

Thank you Chairman Pavlov, Vice Chair Emmons, Minority Vice Chair Hopgood and members of the Senate Education Committee for the opportunity to be here with you today. I am very pleased to have received this invitation from the Committee to discuss how digital learning and the effective use of technology can help drive better learning for all students in Michigan—regardless of their geography or socioeconomic status.

As president of the Alliance for Excellent Education—a Washington, DC-based national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national, federal, and state policy to ensure that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for college and a career—I've traveled the country to see firsthand how technology can improve struggling schools and empower teachers. Digital hardware by itself does not bring about change, but by combining teachers and technology with proper leadership, vision, and planning, schoolhouses become robust and effective learning environments.

Michigan has made significant progress in improving education by promoting online opportunities, supporting innovation through charter schools, and offering professional development and data analysis tools for teachers. It's also one of forty-six states to adopt college- and career-ready standards known as the common core state standards.

I especially applaud the Michigan Department of Education and State Superintendent Mike Flanagan for his leadership in sparking a positive environment for digital learning by implementing the nation's first-ever high school graduation requirement that every student has an online experience. He also supports competency-based advancement through pilots and seat-time waivers. I encourage the Senate Education Committee to support Superintendent Flanagan's efforts in this area as he works with groups of local school districts to help them navigate barriers to implementing successful adoptions of blended learning.

I also urge you to consider how digital learning fits into the broader education reform landscape. In its simplest form, digital learning is any instructional practice that effectively uses technology to strengthen a student's learning experience. It emphasizes high-quality instruction and provides access to challenging content, instant feedback from assessments and data systems, opportunities for learning anytime and anywhere, and individualized instruction to ensure all students reach their full potential to succeed in college and a career. Many instructional leaders are coining the phrase "blended learning" to describe the combination of traditional learning environments with the systemic use of effective and reliable technology applications to improve learning outcomes.

Like most states, Michigan is looking at continuing funding challenges brought about by declining local, state, and federal revenues and tight budgets. At the same time, the state is being challenged to raise student performance for more and more children. I have balanced budgets as a governor and it is never easy. It is going to require thinking outside the box to allocate resources in a way that makes the state dollar more productive and effective.

Michigan is being challenged to do more with less, but the state is not alone in this trend in education. Nationally, the economic need to graduate more students with higher standards is not being met. Twenty-five percent of a typical class of ninth graders will not graduate from high school.[1] Of those who do make it through high school, only twenty-five percent of them will be prepared to succeed in college (based on research from ACT).[2] Even more troubling, students of color have a graduation rate of just over 50 percent.[3] These students are not only the nation's children, they are its future workforce. For their sake, as well as the nation's economic future, we cannot afford to fail them.

It is a well-documented fact that educational attainment has a direct impact on future earnings. Here in Michigan, high school dropouts make up the largest portion of those who are unemployed at 27 percent. That rate is 1.5 times the rate for high school graduates with no further education, double the rate for those with some college, and 4.5 times the rate for college graduates.[4] Those numbers are clear. The more education you have the better chance you are going to be employed. Likewise, graduates with a four-year degree earn an average of $47,000 a year, followed by those with a two-year degree who earn an average of $33,000. High school graduates earn an average of $25,000, and finally, those who drop out only earn an average of about $16,000 a year. That's the difference between earning nearly $8 per hour as a dropout, $12 an hour as a high school graduate, or $23 per hour with a college degree.[5] Once upon a time there were many good jobs available that did not require a significant amount of education, but those times have passed.

According to research compiled by Anthony Carnevale from Georgetown University, the percentage of jobs requiring some college education or more was 28 percent in 1973. Today, that number is 60 percent and is expected to increase. By 2018, 62 percent of jobs in Michigan will require postsecondary education.[6] From the same time period, the number of jobs available to high school dropouts has declined tremendously. In 1973, one third of jobs were available to high school dropouts; today that number has fallen to 11 percent.[7]

Educational attainment also has a direct benefit to the nation and the state of Michigan. If Michigan's graduation rate were to increase to 90 percent, the state would reap huge economic benefits, including as much as $255 million in increased annual earnings, $543 million in increased home sales, $23 million in car sales, and 1,000 new jobs. All told, there would likely be as much as a $226 million increase in Michigan's gross state product and $53 million more dollars in federal, state, and local tax revenues—and these numbers only represent the likely benefits from increasing the graduation rate for the Class of 2011.[8] Imagine the profound impact that increasing the graduation rate every year would have on the people of Michigan and the entire nation. The message is clear: the best economic stimulus is a high school diploma.

Another challenge is the need for highly qualified teachers. Generally, the trend for teacher retention and experience in Michigan is going in the wrong direction as it is in most states. In 2007, 31 percent of Michigan teachers had fewer than five years of experience in the classroom; that number is currently 34 percent and growing as teachers retire or leave the teaching profession. Another issue is the need for specialized teachers. In Michigan there are 639 certified physics teachers, but there are more than 730 high schools.[9] However, that is much better than some states where the ratio is 88 to 440.

Quite frankly, the innovation train has left the station. Just as every other industry, including the automobile industry, schools are faced with increasing the quality of their product with fewer resources. Other industries have systemically embraced the power of technology to accomplish the organizational goals. Schools and districts need to do the same.

So how do we get there from here? The nation must move school improvement planning processes from "technology optional" to those that are "technology essential." The objective is not about having the latest technology, it's about improving learning by implementing solutions that support teachers and empower students.

In assessing these challenges, I am pleased to have joined with Gov. Jeb Bush in a bipartisan effort to release recommendations and principles that are contained in the "10 Elements of High-Quality Digital Learning." These elements serve as a roadmap to provide districts with the ability to bring the most effective combinations of digital learning to teachers and students and customizing instruction for all kids. The goal was to work with a broad array of experts to identify the policies and practices that local, state, and national leaders can adopt to create a high-quality online learning landscape. These elements were developed to empower school leaders with succinct conditions to promote innovation, retool schools, build basic skills, as well as increase the critical twenty-first-century skills necessary for success in college and a career.

I often talk about the three Ts—teachers, technology, and time—that are essential to developing a comprehensive digital learning strategy. These three themes are essential to rethinking education. Imagine an opportunity for students to learn in ways that meet their individual needs and keeping them more engaged in school. Imagine an opportunity for a student to progress when they are ready to move on and not be forced to simply move on because of an artificial deadline like an academic calendar. They move on when they are ready, because they mastered the subject.

Teachers across the country are seizing the three Ts to implement reliable common-sense technology solutions in their instruction. Some are using off-the-shelf, inexpensive options to "flip" their classrooms—video taping the traditional classroom lecture for students to watch at home as homework. This allows class time for the students to take what they learned in the lectures and apply it in projects, discussions, and small groups for deeper understanding of concepts; this is a common-sense idea that meets student needs.

These kinds of innovations are happening in public schools across the country. In North Carolina, Mooresville Graded School District implemented a digital conversion initiative beginning in 2007. While involving a significant shift from print to digital content material and

the deployment of an internet-accessible device for every student and teacher, Mooresville's focus centered on changes in teaching and learning.

Mooresville's teachers and administrators participate in extensive, ongoing, and job-embedded professional development using a distributed leadership model. They learn how to maximize the potential of the technology to personalize learning, including utilizing digital content and resources in which students can become creators of knowledge and products, as well as implementing digital assessments that provide timely feedback to ensure the availability of data for planning and decisionmaking. Not only is the shift in instructional strategies and learning evident in the schools and classrooms in Mooresville, but the district has made tremendous strides in student achievement. Mooresville is now third out of 115 school districts in North Carolina in student achievement based on state test scores. This represents a dramatic jump from the bottom quarter of all districts just several years ago. The graduation rate has increased 25 percentage points in five years and is now the third-highest cohort rate in North Carolina. Mooresville has accomplished this with one of the lowest per-pupil expenditures in the state, ranking ninety-ninth out of the 115 districts.[10]

Floydada Independent School District is another example of a public school system making this shift successfully. Floydada is a rural district in western Texas in which more than 86 percent of students are in low socioeconomic circumstances. The nearest community college is more than seventy miles away. In 2004, Floydada began to implement the Technology Immersion Pilot, a 1:1 initiative in which middle school students and their teachers received laptops to facilitate learning. In the following years, Floydada expanded the effort to include high school and elementary school students. They have found that job-embedded, ongoing, and sustainable professional learning is at the core of the transformation of teaching and learning. Teachers and administrators report that this is not just about the technology; it is about a true change in instructional strategies, access to digital content and courses, and use of data and assessment to better understand the needs of students. Instruction often includes project-based learning and collaboration, as well as students as producers of knowledge and products. Middle school discipline referrals have been cut in half since the program's implementation, and Floydada's high school and middle school students have achieved double-digit gains in all core subject areas.

While an increase in student achievement is an important indicator of success, students in Floydada have other experiences that open their minds to new possibilities. Students have the opportunity to (1) communicate digitally with national experts, such as NASA engineers; (2) interact with people and experience places beyond Floydada; and (3) take online college courses for credit while still in high school. Superintendent Gilbert Trevino observed that while previously "students couldn't see beyond the school district of Floydada," now they have an understanding of careers and opportunities outside the area. Floydada has also been able to apply funds to support students in taking online college courses. In School Year 2010–11, seniors accumulated 450 college credits—a savings of $65,000 for the students and their parents. In many cases, taking college courses in high school allows students to see themselves as successful college students—a significant achievement, since more than half of the adults in Floydada do not have a high school degree. Technology has completely changed the teaching and learning

experiences for students in Floydada to ensure that they graduate prepared for college and a career.[11]

A large district outside of Houston, Texas also made the shift. More than ten years ago, Klein Independent School District (ISD) began to look at how the district could best integrate technology into the curriculum. The district undertook a planning process that included teachers, parents, and other community stakeholders. The district is working to implement one-to-one laptops across the district; has implemented learning management systems along with systems to integrate student data; and is working tirelessly to provide teachers with the necessary professional development. For example, at Krimmel Middle School, teachers engage in ongoing, embedded professional develop similar to the lesson study model. Every teacher in the school participates by observing another teacher's lesson and engaging in guided reflection. This provides teachers with opportunities to see technology in use as well as increases cross-grade and cross-curricular collaboration.

Klein ISD has seen achievement gaps close and outcomes in both achievement and college-ready rates increase. At Klein Forest High School, the percentage of students who were college ready increased from 25 percent to 43 percent in seven years. Achievement on state assessments increased by about 20 percentage points for African American, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students in both math and English language arts.[12]

Teachers have a critical role to play as the nation continues to progress from yesterday's learning environments to those that are more tailored, flexible, robust, and challenging. That is why, on February 1 of this year, the Alliance and twenty-five core partners held the first-ever Digital Learning Day, to celebrate great teaching fueled by effective use of technology. More than 18,000 teachers representing almost 2 million students participated in the inaugural event. Seven thousand Michigan students were among those from around the country and globe who celebrated great teaching and learning.

The momentum for Digital Learning Day increased quickly because it was a positive celebration of and for teachers that didn't add new activities to their already-busy day. Instead, it helped teachers think about new ways of teaching lessons to improve effectiveness and productivity. Digital Learning Day shed light on many teachers who are already using technology that result in more student achievement gains.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are at a crossroads and the next twenty-four months is a critical time to not only keep the wheels of progress turning, but to accelerate the rate of improvement through the effective use of technology. This is the time for those of us, including me, who are experiencing firsthand an emerging and ever-changing world of technology to ensure the nation's education system is agile and flexible enough to offer its youth the high-quality education they deserve. By doing so, this challenging moment can be turned around by embracing common-sense progress in teaching and learning.

Thank you again the opportunity to share my thoughts with you on these important topics.

Endnotes

[1] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 1972–2009* (NCES 2012–006) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011).

[2] ACT, *The Condition of College & Career Readiness*, based on *ACT Profile Report—National: Graduating Class 2011*, www.act.org/readiness/2011 (accessed December 2011). An alternative measure of college readiness, based on SAT scores in reading, mathematics, and writing, is issued by the College Board; that measure in 2011 was 43 percent.

[3] Alliance for Excellent Education, "Education and the Economy: Boosting the Nation's Economy by Improving High School Graduation Rates Among Students of Color and Native Students" (Washington, DC: Author, 2011).

[4] Michigan Department of Technology, Management, and Budget, *Michigan Economic and Workforce Indicators* (Detroit, MI: Bureau of Labor Market Information and Strategic Initiative, 2012), http://milmi.org/admin/uploadedPublications/1885_Winter_2012_Final.pdf (accessed May 22, 2012).

[5] Unpublished data from Economic Modeling Specialists, Inc., analyzed by the Alliance for Excellent Education.

[6] A. Carnevale, N. Smith, and J. Strohl, *Help Wanted: Projecting Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, June 2010).

[7] Ibid.

[8] Unpublished data from Economic Modeling Specialists, Inc., analyzed by the Alliance for Excellent Education.

[9] Michigan Department of Education, Center for Educational Performance and Information, Registry of Educational Personnel reports.

[10] T. Schwartzbeck, M. A. Wolf, *The Digital Learning Imperative: How Technology and Teaching Meet Today's Education Challenges* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, January 2012).

[11] Learn more about Floydada at http://powerontexas.com/.

[12] Learn more about Klein ISD at http://powerontexas.com/ and www.digitallearningday.org.