Remarks from Chad Wyen, Superintendent of Mad River Local schools

A school district's graduation rate is its most telling measure of success.

Our graduation rate at Mad River Local Schools has not dropped with the introduction of high-stakes testing. Rather, just the opposite has occurred. We're graduating more students and at a much high rate.

In 2001, Mad River's graduation rate was 57%. Today, it is 82% for students graduating in 4 years; 86% for students who need 5 years.

That achievement has occurred because of the relentless focus of our staff and the critical partnerships we've developed with families. And, of course, our students have worked long and hard!

There is no substance to the argument that higher expectations depress graduation rates. As Dr. Lasley stated, anytime you transition to a new set of standards or a new assessment, scores naturally drop as teaching staff and students immerse themselves in the new objectives and targets.

But we can and do meet higher standards, often exceeding them.

Let me also share important context about what's happened in our district during that same period when we've been driving up graduation.

In 2001, Mad River's economically disadvantaged population was 35%. During the last 15 years, our poverty rate has almost doubled. Today nearly 70% of our students fall into this category.

One could assume that this tremendous increase in poverty would result in graduation rates falling precipitously. Poverty absolutely makes it more difficult for students to achieve. But it can't be an excuse – not for young people and not for us as leaders and educators. Our district's response to these changing demographics has been to double down on how we support students who need more help and attention.

The proof of the effectiveness of that intense work is our graduation rate: It is up by 25% -- EVEN as Ohio was raising standards for students and more of our families are economically challenged.

Setting policy based on the assumption that students from families living in poverty can't or won't achieve does not benefit children – and the belief just isn't true. The only subgroup of students with whom we're struggling to improve graduation rates is our special education population. We have more work to do there, and we welcome your help.

How are we driving up graduation rates?

Mad River has a robust dropout prevention effort based on the RTI model. We're dedicated to meeting the needs of all learners at all levels – offering a layered approach.

As someone on the front lines, I can assure you that students are not dropping out because of the graduation requirements aligned with testing. They give up when they're not engaged. They stop trying

if we don't help them understand the connection between their high-school courses and their opportunities after high school.

This issue needs to be addressed – and not just by telling us we have to have a "Career Advising Policy" and "Student Success Plans." We need to have effective, targeted interventions and supports for students – not more requirements for compliance documents.

What am I asking you to do? Please give the standards a chance to work. Let this process work itself out. Once you have meaningful data -- at least 3 to 5 years of trend information -- then let's have a conversation about what's not working.

If, on the other hand, you decide to roll back the new, higher expectations, it's our kids who will be hurt the most. And it goes without saying that backpedaling will not instill confidence in the State Board of Education, the Ohio Department of Education or our elected leaders.

We need you to stand firm about how we prepare our children to succeed in a world that expects adults to work hard, show grit and apply knowledge.

Remarks from Shannon Cox, Assistant Superintendent, Montgomery County Educational Service Center

Monitoring which students are, and are not, tracking toward successful completion of End of Course Examination graduation requirements is essential for ensuring that young people receive the help they need for success.

This monitoring process starts with school districts collecting data that teachers, students and parents all are able to access and use as they help students earn a high-school diploma through one of the three options. Discussions and early drafts of digital tools created through available district technology have already begun within the Miami Valley Regional Curriculum Directors meetings.

Subgroups have been tasked to create tools and develop processes using tools already in place to help identify and track students' graduation points through the three different options.

Two such examples are: a spreadsheet created to house End of Course Exam Scores, content sub-scores, industry credential, and ACT information. This will allow one to see through visual aids and specific numerical data who is at-risk of not meeting the appropriate cumulative and sub-score thresholds. This will help schools to know who might be in need of targeted remediation and retesting.

The second example uses the already established Student Information systems, such as Google Classroom, Power School, Progress Book and others, to create a class titled "Graduation Requirements" when a student is in 8th or 9th grade that will be exported each year in order to be imported the next year to follow the student to graduation.

Each year the appropriate student specific information can be loaded into the class, allowing both students and parents to "see" the progress toward meeting graduation requirements, resulting in shared ownership the progress.

These efforts are part of the shift in career- and college- readiness culture we are building in Montgomery County.

Remarks, Lori Ward, Superintendent, Dayton Public Schools

Dayton Public Schools students and staff have steadily improved, i.e., graduation rate increased from 59% to 72% (2009 - 2014), albeit the numerous changes that have occurred. Interventions such as credit recovery and mentors have assisted students while professional development on the Ohio Learning Standards have allowed teachers to refine their practice to a higher level. Dayton Public Schools has much work to do and appreciate the General Assembly and the State Board of Education initiating changes to improve reporting of school performance. However, with the pending implementation of Every Student Succeeds Act, it would be prudent to review the State's school accountability system, in its entirety, to ensure school performance is reported equitable, fair, and understandable by all Ohioans. In essence, the state has implemented multiple changes over the years without collecting sufficient data and the changes have not resulted in an effective school accountability system...

Remarks, Tim Hopkins, Superintendent, Brookville Schools

Dr. Lasley and Superintendent Wyen have given you impassioned and statistically sound reasoning behind the need to maintain high expectations for all the children of Ohio. What they have described for you is an approach and attitude that all children can learn regardless of their socioeconomic, racial or ethnic background. Not only can they learn, but through the commitment of school districts and dedicated teachers across this state they will meet your and our expectations.

Unlike my colleague Chad, I am a superintendent in the sunset of my career. As a building principal in 1990 I clearly remember the clamor over the ninth grade proficiency test. The anti-arguments were clear: Students wouldn't pass, retention and failure would permeate our high schools and the system would crash and burn. As we all know, that didn't happen. Fast forward several years and the third grade reading guarantee created that same concern. Once again, our concerns were largely unrealized. Through interventions and programs such as the Preschool Promise in Montgomery County we are helping children attain an acceptable reading level. Not just affluent children, not just children from traditional families, but rather children from all walks of life.

Rather than standing here reciting a lot of numbers and statistics, my brief comments for you today are more about attitude, a belief system, expectations and the approach. My district, Brookville Local, is nestled in farmland in northwestern Montgomery County. Brookville certainly isn't a community built around white collar homes and parents who all have college degrees. But it is a district that is encouraging higher expectations for young people because our parents know that our young people are entering a very different economy than what they confronted when they graduated. As a result of those higher expectations, from our graduating class of 2016, over 96% of the students completed the FAFSA form; last year (2015) the figure was 59%. Think about that, **_over 96% of a graduating class in an Ohio semi-rural school district completed the FAFSA_** . Our young people will not back down from high expectations and neither will our parents. Instead they are meeting the challenge. We understand the absolute need to further education and are taking the necessary steps to secure success for ALL our young people.

We are here today because the 16 public school districts in Montgomery County have locked arms in a united effort to do what is necessary to facilitate children reaching their dreams. In Brookville, day in

and day out, we are working to build a culture that emphasizes graduating career and college ready. Roughly one third of our 11th and 12th graders attend the Miami Valley Career Technical Center, which establishes a foundation to enter the workforce with a marketable credential. Over 45% of our graduates begin their postsecondary schooling at Sinclair Community College, a local and affordable option to a four-year college. This year we had four graduates who proudly announced they will enter the military to pursue their dreams. My point is that whether it is a traditional four-year college or one of the aforementioned paths, Brookville students understand the need to further their training and education if they want to increase their chances for a living wage job as an adult...that is what our young people in Montgomery County require; that is what all Ohio young people need.