

AS PREPARED
STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESS
GOVERNOR MIKE DEWINE
HOUSE CHAMBER
THE OHIO STATEHOUSE
COLUMBUS, OH
APRIL 10, 2024

Speaker Stephens,

President Huffman,

Leader Antonio and Leader Russo,

Members of the General Assembly,

Chief Justice Kennedy and Justices of the Ohio Supreme Court,

Elected State Officials,

Lieutenant Governor Husted,

Members of My Cabinet,

My Fellow Citizens of Ohio....

I want to talk today about Ohio's future.

I want to talk today about Ohio's children.

It has been said that the future is "not our own" -- that it belongs to our children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren -- and that they are the instruments by which our greatest hopes and our greatest aspirations will be accomplished.

All of our dreams and all of our goals -- really, our vision for the future -- ultimately depends on them.

The single most important thing we can do for Ohio's future is to ensure that all Ohio children -- no matter where they live, no matter who their parents are -- have the opportunity to live up to their full God-given potential and that they have the chance to pursue their dreams and their passions in life.

Kids have only one chance to grow up. So, we must have a great sense of urgency, as every moment we waste is a moment they lose.

Our children grow up so very quickly! If you don't believe that, ask a parent of a child graduating from high school. They will tell you just how fast that childhood ended.

President Reagan talked about this in a graduation speech at Seton Hall University. Listen to what he said:

“You, who are graduating, have taken virtually your entire lives to reach this moment. To you, it seems like a very long time. But there are others here today -- parents and grandparents -- who share this day with you. And as they look back, it seems as if the journey only started yesterday.”

We may think we have a lot of time to help Ohio's children, but we really don't.

EDUCATION

So many things impact a child's future, but we know that reading -- and the ability to understand what you have read -- is the key to success in school and the key to success in life.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library

When I was running for Governor, Fran told me that she wanted to make sure every Ohio child under five years-of-age would be eligible to receive a book in the mail each month from Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. When she became First Lady, only 13 percent of Ohio's children were getting books. Today, all Ohio children under five are now eligible, and we are at 60 percent enrollment -- with 402,000 Ohio children receiving a free book in the mail each and every month!

Let me introduce my bride of almost 57 years -- Ohio First Lady Fran DeWine!

Members of the General Assembly -- Fran and I are so grateful to you and to our county partners for your support and your investments in the Imagination Library. Ohio now leads the Nation in enrollment, and since Fran became First Lady, Ohio children have received almost 16 million books in the mail!

Science of Reading

I also want to thank you for your support of the Science of Reading.

We know that the earlier a child is reading at grade level, the more success that child will have in later grades and after graduation. Last year, I told you that 40 percent of Ohio 3rd graders were not on track as proficient readers. However, as more schools move to the Science of Reading, we are beginning to see improvements.

During a visit to Northridge Elementary School in Dayton last spring, Superintendent Dave Jackson shared with us how they have used data to measure the effectiveness of their reading instruction.

Northridge had been using the Whole Language approach to teach reading. During the 2018 to 2019 school year, only 46 percent of their kindergartners were on track. But, the next school year, they began the switch to the Science of Reading. By the Spring, 60 percent of kindergartners were on track. And, by the Spring of 2023, 73 percent of their kindergarten students were on track!

We are seeing similar results all over Ohio from schools that have switched completely to the Science of Reading!

As our K through 12 schools move to the Science of Reading, our colleges and our universities that prepare our future teachers also must make that switch. Fran and I know from our many classroom visits and from what teachers and superintendents all across Ohio have told us is that most teachers, while in college, were not taught to use the Science of Reading to teach their future students how to read. This is a huge problem for these teachers and for their schools. And now, many of our schools are having to retrain their teachers.

So today, I am calling on every college and university President in Ohio -- every Provost, every Dean of a College of Education -- to immediately align their teacher training programs with what we know works -- and that -- that is the Science of Reading.

Early Childhood Education

I want to talk for a moment about early childhood education, which lays the foundation for a child's future success in kindergarten and throughout their primary education. Sadly, we still have too many Ohio children who are not prepared to enter kindergarten, and so we must do more to ensure that all Ohio children get to the starting line.

That is why we are revising Ohio's childcare quality rating system to simplify and reduce paperwork, focus on better child outcomes, and -- for the first time ever -- provide our quality-rated programs access to curriculum aligned with the Science of Reading.

Further, we are making childcare more affordable and accessible to Ohio's working families. Doing so, we will build today's workforce by getting people back to work and will ensure that tomorrow's workforce is prepared for the demands that lie ahead.

With the help and support of the General Assembly, we have expanded access to childcare and Ohio's public pre-school programs through greater eligibility and funding investments. As a result, we are now serving 16,000 more children today!

And -- we are going to do even more!

I am very pleased today to announce the creation of Ohio's new "Childcare Choice Voucher Program" for Ohio families that make up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level or \$60,000 for a family of four. This new program will provide financial support for 8,000 more Ohio children!

Not only that, we will also be re-allocating federal funding to dedicate \$85 million to create new “Childcare Access Grants” to improve and expand existing childcare facilities.

And, to help the many parents caring for their children with special needs who can’t find childcare providers, we created Ohio PROMISE, where early childhood professionals learn how to care for and teach children with disabilities. In less than a year, over 2,700 professionals have been trained, and we have seen a 20 percent increase in the number of children with disabilities who are now being served.

By doing all of these things, we will help more families. Businesses will find more workers. And, Ohio’s economy will thrive.

Teachers and Principals

When I think about how we can shape education for the greatest benefit of our children, I am reminded of something that our high school principal, Mr. John Malone, once told Fran and me. He said that when it comes to education, only two things really matter -- a willing student and a good teacher.

A good teacher has the power to fundamentally change the course of a child’s life. I’m sure that each of us can recall at least one great teacher who inspired us or motivated us and really changed our lives.

I would like to take a moment to thank all teachers in Ohio. In the Gallery with us today are Ohio’s 2024 Teachers of the Year. Will you please stand, so we can give them a round of applause!

We also know that school building principals are vitally important to a school’s success. They determine the culture in the school. A great principal is the leader in the school, who creates the conditions for students, teachers, and staff, alike, to thrive.

That is why I have directed our new Department of Education and Workforce to create a “Principal Apprenticeship Program,” so that aspiring principals can watch veteran principals in action, through hands-on, in-school training that will better prepare them for the challenges of the job. It builds on Ohio’s successful “Teacher Apprenticeship Program” and will ensure that schools across the State have the leadership they need to succeed.

Career Pathways

Let’s talk for a moment about education requirements. Ohio law today dictates that every student must have a plan on how they will meet their graduation requirements. Yet, the law fails to require maybe the most important thing -- a plan for students to find a career they love and can excel at after graduation!

Every Ohio student needs a graduation plan that includes not only how they meet their course requirements, but also what they intend to do post-graduation and how they intend to pay for it. So today, I am asking the Legislature to make a very simple fix in statute to insert career planning into existing graduation plan requirements so that every Ohio student leaves school on a career pathway.

Fran and I want for all kids what we want for our own children and grandchildren -- and now our great-granddaughter -- and that is for them to find something they are deeply passionate about and that they can pursue as a career. For many Ohio students, they find their passion and pathway through career tech.

Career Tech Education

Fran and I and Lieutenant Governor Husted have visited career tech programs all across the State -- and they are doing some amazing things! Yet, a couple of years ago, we would repeatedly hear that kids were being turned away from career tech because there wasn't enough room in the classes or there weren't enough slots open in a student's area of interest. And sometimes, the school didn't have the right equipment, or it was simply too old.

With the strong support of the General Assembly, we have been making historic investments to eliminate waitlists and ensure that any Ohio student who wants career tech education has access to it! In November, we announced \$200 million in grants to build and grow new career tech classrooms. And, just last month, we awarded more than \$67 million to programs for new equipment.

Higher Education

As our Ohio high school students plan for their future, they need to have all kinds of options -- certainly including career tech. Members of the General Assembly -- Let's you and I commit that in the future, we will do what we have to do, so that no Ohio child who wants career tech is ever shut out because there is simply not room for them.

If Ohio is to compete in the 21st Century, we must have an all-of-the-above attitude regarding education. Just as we need welders, mechanics, and those who understand advanced manufacturing, we also need chemists, engineers, and researchers. We need those with career tech credentials, as well as those with two-year, four-year, and advanced degrees.

We need to play to our strengths -- and we have a lot of them! We are blessed with great colleges and universities and have become a net importer of college students from other states. But, we must keep more of our students in Ohio.

I want to thank the Members of the General Assembly for helping us to enable more Ohio kids to go to college in Ohio -- and to stay in Ohio to fulfill their dreams! Since 2019, we have successfully persuaded all 14 public universities in Ohio to provide four-year tuition and room and board guarantees so that no Ohio family will experience an increase in college costs once their child starts college!

When I came into office, Ohio's need-based aid for college students -- the "Ohio College Opportunity Grant" or OCOG -- had been cut nearly in half from its all-time high in 2007. We have been restoring that aid for Ohio's neediest students and have more than doubled the per student award. And, for students in STEM fields, we have also doubled funding for the "Choose Ohio First Scholarship."

Finally, the top five percent of Ohio high school seniors -- who will be graduating in just a few short weeks -- will be the very first students to receive Ohio's new "Merit Scholarship," renewable for up to \$5,000 for each of four years!

All of these scholarships will help keep Ohio college students in Ohio, and I look forward to working with you, the General Assembly, to keep even more students here in Ohio.

We used to look at how many students started college. In 2013, we changed that and started holding colleges accountable for the number of those who actually graduate.

It is now time to begin measuring how many of those who graduate have a job in six months and if that job is related to their college degree. Today, I am asking the Ohio Department of Higher Education to collaborate with our colleges and universities to collect this data. When picking a college, our families deserve this information -- and we must make sure that they get it!

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

When a child is not healthy, that child will not thrive in school. Let me talk about children with vision problems.

Let Every Ohio Child See

If a child has difficulty seeing, they will have difficulty reading and difficulty learning. Tragically, that is the case for too many Ohio children.

Today, all Ohio children are required to get a vision screening test in school. But, of the children who fail that screening, the vast majority of them never get a comprehensive follow-up eye exam to determine if they need eyeglasses.

It is wrong that in the third decade of the 21st Century, tens of thousands of kids in Ohio who need eyeglasses are simply not getting them.

However, there ARE leaders across Ohio, who are doing tremendous work so that children can get eyeglasses. For example, the wonderful people at Sight for All United in the Mahoning Valley and Athens Eye Care Mobile Clinic in Appalachia are bringing comprehensive follow-up eye exams directly to schools.

They are here with us today in the Gallery. Please stand up, so we can give you a round of applause.

Their models work -- and we must take them statewide!

Today, I am announcing the creation of the “Children’s Vision Strike Force.” This will not be a study committee. We know the problem, and we know the solution. Rather, this group will work with vision care professionals in every corner of Ohio to scale proven models statewide and provide schools with the technical assistance they need to implement these very important programs.

Ohio has never had a statewide plan to ensure that every Ohio child who needs glasses will get glasses. Now we do!

School-based Clinics

Another challenge we face is that too many Ohio children -- and adults -- live in communities where they do not have easy access to good, basic primary healthcare.

A number of Ohio schools have partnered with hospitals or other providers to bring primary care inside the school building for the benefit of the children and the adult’s in the community. Less than three miles from here, for example, Nationwide Children’s Hospital is serving the youth at East High School inside their school building. Thanks to a clinic right on school grounds, students are able to schedule appointments with healthcare professionals or walk right in if they are sick.

These clinics work because our schools are the heart and soul of our communities. It’s where people are used to gathering and where people are comfortable going. They also have a significant impact not just on students’ health, but also on their academic performance, including improved attendance, higher GPAs, grade promotions, better college preparation, and reduced rates of suspension.

As part of the General Assembly’s historic investment in Appalachia, we enabled local communities to determine their revitalization priorities. We recently announced the new “Appalachian Children’s Health Initiative,” which is helping 20 Ohio counties to create or expand community- and school-based health clinics to serve at least 61,000 students and 375,000 residents. These communities decided that this was their top priority.

Today, I am asking every school in Ohio to look at the school-based clinic model. It works! Take a look at it. Talk to your communities about partnering with your local hospital, primary care clinics, Community Health Centers, or Children’s Hospital.

We want to help you get the technical expertise you need to build your own school-based health centers -- like how you can use our “Student Wellness and Success” funds to build a clinic. And so today, I am asking several of our state agencies to work together with school district leaders to provide needed technical assistance on how to utilize existing resources to build more high-quality, sustainable, school-based clinics.

Moms and Babies

I would like to now talk about the health of our youngest Ohioans.

We know that the two biggest causes of death for infants are being born too early and not sleeping in a safe environment.

I want to thank the General Assembly for working with us on so many different initiatives over the past five years to help vulnerable moms. With a focus on reducing premature births and encouraging safe sleep, we have helped thousands of pregnant women and new moms get medical care and other resources to access healthy food, breastfeeding support, baby cribs, and guidance on stress management.

We have greatly expanded our home visiting program, where trained professionals come directly to the home of moms and parents to answer the many questions all new parents have; to serve as a support when they are exhausted and worried; and to help them understand the importance of healthy living.

And, we will be helping nearly 36,000 expectant mothers this year to have healthy babies through our partnership with over a hundred OB-GYN medical practices to offer comprehensive care. That means not just providing prenatal clinical care, but also directing women to needed services, including funding for food, housing, and transportation.

I am also pleased today to announce that we will be launching a new pilot program in 11 Ohio counties that we call “Family Connects.” Every new mom will be eligible to receive a visit from a nurse about three weeks after delivering her baby. These visiting nurses can guide families to clinical or community supports; recognize when a mom and baby may need additional help as a result of exhaustion or trouble with breastfeeding; and remind or teach new moms about how a baby can sleep safely.

Similar programs that we have looked at have a track record of reducing infant mortality. In places where these programs have been implemented, rates of child protective services investigations have decreased by 44 percent, and mothers showed a 30 percent drop in post-partum depression and a 50 percent reduction in emergency room visits.

In our next budget, I will be asking you for your support to take Family Connects statewide.

Outcomes Acceleration for Kids Learning Network (OAK)

When I took office, we started to reimagine healthcare in Ohio, starting by transforming Medicaid managed care to be focused more on positive health outcomes and less on the business of healthcare. Historically, our system pays healthcare providers to provide care when you need that care. We don’t reward doctors for actually keeping you healthy.

Well, we are changing that -- in a very big way.

Today, I am very pleased to announce the creation of a first-of-its-kind partnership between the Ohio Department of Medicaid, the Ohio Children’s Hospitals, and the Medicaid Managed Care

plans to change how we deliver and coordinate care for our children. We are calling this historic undertaking the “Outcomes Acceleration for Kids Learning Network” -- or OAK for short.

We will no longer focus on sick care, but on well care!

To do this, we will prioritize:

***Better management of childhood asthma;

***Annual well care visits for infants and adolescents;

***Follow-up care for families after leaving the emergency room when their child has a mental health crisis; and

***Access to the latest lifesaving treatments for children living with Sickle Cell disease.

Let’s take asthma as an example. Asthma affects one in 12 children in Ohio. When asthma is not managed well, kids miss school, they can’t participate in sports, their parents miss work, and trips to the emergency room are all too frequent.

To manage asthma well, it requires taking the time to understand the needs and circumstances of a family; making sure they have access to care and medications; ensuring the school nurse knows the child’s asthma action plan. These holistic actions -- all together -- are what kids and families need to manage asthma effectively. The OAK Learning Network will reward and incentivize our healthcare system in a new way to focus on asthma prevention.

Further, we have the ability to change the game for those children with Sickle Cell disease -- a condition that can cause organ damage and stroke, reduce the quality of life, and shorten the lives of those who have it. More than 4,500 Ohioans have Sickle Cell disease, and roughly 95 percent of them are African American.

The disease impacts their lives in deep and profound ways. Youth with Sickle Cell disease miss an average of 20 to 40 days of school each year!

Our OAK Learning Network will help patients with the effective management of this disease and connect them to resources and newly approved, life-altering treatments. By doing so -- we believe that within three years -- Ohio can lead the Nation in the treatment of Sickle Cell disease and actually cure the disease for Ohio’s sickest children.

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

As I have in my last two State of the State speeches, we focused our attention on mental health -- because we are in crisis. In fact, this whole country is in crisis.

Our children today are more isolated, more anxious, more depressed, and more suicidal. There are a lot of factors impacting the behavioral health of our children. Likely number one on the list is the use of smartphones and access to social media -- and I want to talk about that now.

Smartphones in Schools and Social Media

In his new book, *The Anxious Generation*, author and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt examines, among other things, the impact that smartphones have had on this generation -- the first generation to go through puberty with instant and constant access to the Internet. Giving a generation of children smartphones, in the author's words, was "the largest uncontrolled experiment humanity has ever performed on its own children."

And that experiment has failed -- failed miserably.

I want to take a moment to recognize my Lieutenant Governor, Jon Husted, and his wife, Tina, who have really started a crusade against smartphone use in schools and for parental notification for children to use social media.

Let's give them a round of applause.

Recently, I joined the Lieutenant Governor and Tina for a roundtable discussion with educators about schools and their cell phone policies. What is happening today is bad -- and if you don't believe me, talk to a teacher! Talk to a principal. Talk to a superintendent. They will all tell you how distracting phones are in the classroom and how negatively they can impact a child's mental health.

When you talk to teachers in schools that have removed phones during the lunch period, they will tell you the change is miraculous! The lunchroom is noisy again! Instead of having their heads down, buried in their phones, kids are talking and interacting and laughing and enjoying themselves.

A number of Ohio schools have made the decision to eliminate smartphone use during the school day -- and it's the right decision.

These phones are detrimental to learning.

They are detrimental to our kids' mental health.

And they need to be removed from the classroom.

I also want to thank the Members of the General Assembly, who have taken on these issues -- and that includes Senators Stephanie Kunze and Bill DeMora and Representatives Steve Demetriou and Tom Young.

Senator Andy Brenner is currently working on an amendment requiring all Ohio schools to adopt a smartphone policy that will minimize phone usage by students in the classroom and make those

policies available to parents and communities. I fully support this measure and encourage the General Assembly to take up this legislation and pass it quickly.

Further, we need to go after the social media companies that are targeting our kids -- addicting them and then monetizing that addiction. What they are doing is shameful!

Last year, as part of our budget, I signed the law requiring parental consent for children under 16 to use social media. However, as you know, Judge Marbley has enjoined the law from going into effect. But -- let's not be deterred.

While it would be best if the federal government set a national standard, they have not acted -- and we cannot wait.

Let's take the lessons we are learning from court rulings across our country and develop a plan for Ohio that can be a blueprint for putting parents -- not social media companies -- back in charge of the digital lives of their children. I believe we can craft a new law that is informed by the concerns expressed by Judge Marbley, is constitutional, and will accomplish all the things we wanted to do in the law that you previously passed.

I am asking you to start working with us to get this done. We have no time to waste.

OhioRISE

Some children in Ohio have extremely complex behavioral healthcare needs. But, if this is not your own child, you can't really imagine what these parents are going through. So, I want to share part of a letter an Ohio mother sent to me about her son:

"I am an adoptive mother with three kids, including my son, Tom. He had been physically and sexually abused starting at the age of five. In recent years, Tom started acting out and became physically aggressive -- hitting walls and smashing furniture, threatening to hurt us with knives.

I was scared every day and feared for the safety of our other kids. On one occasion, we had to lock ourselves and the other kids in the basement while we called the police to restrain our son. As a result of what he's been through, he ran away, started using drugs to cope, and was physically aggressive toward a convenience store owner. He was arrested and locked up in detention -- and [all] he really needed was treatment."

These are not isolated cases. This is the reality of life for a lot of Ohio parents, and too often, they just don't know where to turn -- and really, they have been pretty much ignored.

We are now giving them a lifeline through our OhioRISE program. Created two years ago, the program connects families and the children who have the most complicated needs to appropriate care -- right here in Ohio. All of these children need more than a doctor. They need therapists, prescribers, teachers, school counselors, and other caring people to help them heal.

Families who participate in OhioRISE are assigned a hands-on care coordinator to bring these professionals and supportive people together to plan and manage care, with the goal of keeping children in their homes and their families together. Since I delivered my State of the State address last year, we have added 14,000 Ohio children to OhioRISE, and today, we are serving 32,000 children -- 11,000 of whom are getting very intensive care, including Tom. His mother went on to say in her letter:

“With nowhere else to turn, relinquishing custody [of Tom] seemed like my only option -- until I was connected to the OhioRISE program. Since being enrolled in OhioRISE, we now have a team of professionals to support Tom and our family. We have found a residential treatment facility [where he can live] and receive the intensive treatment he needs. His behavior is improving, and we are able to visit him often. Additionally, OhioRISE helped connect my entire family with therapy following the incidents -- and we are healing.”

This is what complete wrap around care should look like -- because no child, no parent, and no family should ever walk alone.

Mobile Response Stabilization Services

One of the biggest complaints I hear in my travels around Ohio is from families who don't know where to turn for help when their child is in a mental health crisis. And so, we are increasing the availability of immediate behavioral health care in the right place at the right time through the expansion of what we call “Mobile Response Stabilization Services.”

These services are similar to what first responders do when they show up for a physical health emergency in the community. Our mobile crisis response units will deploy within 60 minutes directly to the youth experiencing distress. A team of trained professionals will conduct safety assessments, de-escalate situations, and offer peer support, among other services.

When I took office, 13 Ohio counties had Mobile Response Stabilization Services. Today, with support from the General Assembly, we are now in 38 Ohio counties. I intend to take this model to all 88 counties, so no matter where you live, if your child is in crisis, that child will get immediate care.

Behavioral Healthcare Workforce

When we talk about expanding mental health treatment, we all know that one of our State's greatest challenges is having enough professionals in the mental health field. The demand for behavioral health services has increased twice as fast as the increase in the workforce.

It is critical that more young people go into community-based behavioral healthcare to serve our most vulnerable Ohioans. We must dramatically increase the pool. And, all of us -- our career tech centers, colleges, and universities -- must work aggressively, as the demand for these jobs is astounding! By the end of this decade, Ohio will need:

***4,500 new chemical dependency professionals;

***4,700 new counselors;

***4,300 new social workers; and

***Hundreds of new psychiatrists.

With generous support from the General Assembly, we created the “Great Minds Fellowship,” with the goal of attracting 4,000 new behavioral health professionals into the field. If you are pursuing a degree in certain areas of behavioral health, you can get \$10,000 toward your education before you graduate.

This isn’t a loan -- it is a grant that you do not have to pay back! And Ohio’s colleges and universities have the funds available right now to spend on these students. Therefore, I am calling on Ohio’s college presidents -- both four-year and two-year -- to make this year count.

Find these students!

Recruit them!

The money is there -- so get it into their hands and get them started!

FOSTER CARE

Throughout my career, I have focused on the needs of children, who at no fault of their own, are placed in foster care. We have made historic investments in to help these children, and as a result, a thousand fewer Ohio children are in foster care today than when I took office.

While that is certainly progress, we must -- and we can -- do better!

Currently, there are more than 1,800 foster children, who live in group settings, because there are not foster families willing or comfortable to take on the significant behavioral challenges and complex needs these foster children present. And, though some of them do need to be in congregate care, the best place for most children is ultimately in a foster home with adults who love them.

There is great work going on right now in Northwest Ohio, where Sandusky, Seneca, Ottawa, and Wyandot Counties have partnered together to recruit foster parents specifically to help children with the most complex needs. Not only have they saved money, but they have also created the opportunity for children to remain in a home with a family.

Representatives from those counties are with us today in the Gallery. Thank you for your innovative work -- and I ask them to stand, as well.

We are replicating what they are doing through a new pilot program that will help more Ohio counties to recruit and support local treatment foster homes by: Providing one-on-one support for families; 24/7 on-call casework and crisis counseling; and specialized training, so that children with complex behavioral needs can stay in a home, with a loving family that can remain actively involved in the treatment process.

I am also very excited to announce, on Fran's behalf, a new effort to get all eligible children in foster care signed up to receive a monthly book from Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. Our Department of Children and Youth is becoming a new affiliate organization. They have developed a system to keep mailing addresses updated so that when a child moves around, the monthly book delivery will always follow.

And so, starting this summer, 5,000 children in Ohio's foster care system will begin receiving a monthly, age-appropriate book from Dolly Parton's Imagination Library of Ohio!

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Members of the General Assembly -- We have accomplished big things together! So, it's really no wonder that Pennsylvania -- as Governor Shapiro put it -- "is sick and tired of losing to friggin' Ohio!"

Ohio's unemployment is at historic lows, the job market is booming, and -- unlike the federal government -- Ohio now has the highest possible credit ratings!

We are a national leader in aerospace!

We are making great progress protecting our precious Lake Erie and our other waterways through H2Ohio!

We have an outstanding State Fair that we are making even better thanks to your investments!

In just a few short weeks, we will be opening Ohio's 76th State Park -- Great Council State Park in Greene County!

And -- Ohio's Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks are now officially a UNESCO World Heritage site!

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

I am grateful for all we have been able to accomplish together, but we have even more to do -- additional urgent issues that we must address.

Delta-8

First, let's talk about intoxicating hemp -- known as Delta-8.

Widely unregulated, it is readily found and easily accessible to kids in gas stations and convenience stores -- disguised as candies, gummies, and even breakfast cereals. It can cause hallucinations, vomiting, tremors, anxiety, dizziness, confusion, and loss of consciousness.

Just in the cases reported to the Ohio Poison Control Centers, there were over 100 Delta-8 poisonings last year, and of those, 40 were involving children aged five or younger. Further, a recent national survey of 12th graders found that over 11 percent had used Delta-8 in the past year.

Because of a loophole in the law, Delta-8 can be sold as hemp, without the warning labels and age restrictions associated with marijuana. And, we know the companies that produce and sell these products intentionally market these harmful products to our children.

Members of the General Assembly -- Today, I am asking you to pass legislation to ban the sale of these dangerous products to our kids.

Marijuana

Then -- there's marijuana.

We must respect the will of Ohio voters. However, I doubt if very many people who voted yes on Issue 2 wanted their kids breathing in marijuana smoke while walking in a public park or on a sidewalk to ball practice or smelling the stench of it walking from the parking lot to a Guardians or Reds game this summer.

That is not what people voted for, but it is what the current law allows. We owe it to our families to change that, and you, Members of the General Assembly, have the power to do that. I ask you to exercise that power.

Flavored Tobacco

Now -- let's not forget about the tobacco companies.

They continue to target our kids -- eager to addict the next generation through cigarettes, vaping, and flavored products. Here's a statistic: Nearly 81 percent of youths ages 12 to 17, who have used a tobacco product, reported that the first product they ever tried was flavored.

The Biden Administration has the authority to stop the sale of flavored tobacco products, including menthol cigarettes and flavored vaping products. But, they have not done so.

I urge them to do that -- but, I think we have all learned that we can't depend on Washington.

We have an obligation to protect Ohio children, and we have the ability to do that. I understand the desire for uniformity statewide, and so I am asking you to pass a uniform statewide law banning flavored vaping and flavored cigarettes.

Juvenile Justice

In November, I created the Ohio Juvenile Justice Working Group to conduct a holistic review of the juvenile justice system in Ohio. I was intentional in involving juvenile judges in this review, because of their commitment to building programs that serve youth in their communities so they can remain with their families.

The Working Group will review the whole juvenile justice system and develop recommendations on behavioral health; safety and operations; staffing; and the youth population served. These recommendations will include placing offenders in smaller facilities. I will be asking you in the future for the resources to implement that very specific recommendation.

Youth Gun Violence

We cannot talk about the health of children without talking about gun violence.

We have dedicated hundreds of millions of dollars to help Ohio's cities and local law enforcement protect Ohio children and citizens through investments in, among other things, new state-of-the-art crime prevention technology and higher staffing levels for their police.

We have also sent in our Ohio State Highway Patrol, Adult Parole Authority, and Ohio Investigative Unit to work side-by-side with local officers to surge into high crime areas to prevent violence and get guns out of the hands of those who are illegally armed. In Cleveland, alone, last year, we supported authorities in arresting more than 100 suspects and seizing more than 460 illegally possessed firearms.

To our Mayors, Chiefs of Police, and local Public Safety Directors -- Our team is ready and willing to surge in and help -- just call us!

Primary Seat Belt Law

We also have an obligation to keep our children safe on Ohio roads and highways.

Thank you for passing the distracted driving law. Because of your action, the lives of many children and adults are being saved. In fact, a study just released last week estimates that the Ohio distracted driving law has already prevented 3,600 crashes and 2,000 injuries and has saved 17 lives.

We also know that a primary seat belt law would protect people traveling on Ohio's roadways. Here are the statistics: Ohio is 10th from the bottom of all states in seat belt use. While the national average for seat belt use is 91 percent, Ohio's number is only 81 percent. Sadly, our youngest drivers have the lowest rate.

That is why I will be coming to you with a proposal to save young people and adults through a primary seat belt law.

CONCLUSION

Before I conclude, I would like to take a moment to remember the five respected former leaders from this body who have died just since the start of this year:

***Former Senate President Stan Aronoff;

***Former Speaker Chuck Kurfess;

***Former Senate Majority Leader Ted Gray;

***Former Senate Minority Leader C.J. Prentiss; and

***Former House Minority Whip Brigid Kelly.

Each of them embodied what is truly great about Ohio, by always looking to the rising sun, focusing on what is important to Ohio families, and fighting for the betterment of this whole State. They will be missed and always remembered.

In January, Fran and I had the great privilege to host and honor some of the most heroic figures who have defined our Nation's aerospace history. They came to Ohio for the unveiling of "Ohioans in Space" -- Bill Hinsch's grand painting of Ohio's space legends: John Glenn, Neil Armstrong, Jim Lovell, Judith Resnik, and Gene Kranz. These American heroes now take their rightful place in our beautiful and historic Statehouse Rotunda, across from the Wright Brothers.

It was truly a thrill to meet and listen to Toledo-native, Gene Kranz, who directed America's missions to the moon through the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo programs. Mr. Kranz spoke of our early space pioneers, who willingly accepted great personal risk in the name of national progress and how they eagerly accepted President Kennedy's challenge to place America's Flag on the moon.

They pushed the envelope -- doing things that had never been done before.

They were children of the Depression. Many were first generation college graduates, who grew up on farms in the Midwest.

They were leaders and team builders.

They stood for something greater than themselves.

They loved their country and vowed to serve, always grounded in the strong work ethic and deeply held values they learned from their own parents.

And -- they all had big dreams.

Tomorrow will be the 54th anniversary of the lift-off of Apollo 13. Ohio's Gene Kranz was the mission's Flight Director and Ohio's Jim Lovell was the mission's Commander.

On the third day of the mission, an oxygen tank exploded, damaging their spacecraft, forcing the three-person crew into a lunar module designed to support only two people for two days. It became their lifeboat for nearly four days.

But -- this was their time in history. Failure, as we know, was never going to be an option.

This ingenious, courageous, resourceful team of risk takers managed to return the spacecraft safely to Earth, splashing down six days after the mission began. When asked during the harrowing mission if he believed that this was going to be NASA's darkest moment, Director Kranz said: "No. This is going to be our finest hour."

For all of us in Ohio -- this now is our time in history -- and we must act with great urgency to not squander this precious, finite window of opportunity when our children are growing up.

This is our time to meet the challenges I have laid out today -- to do the hard things that matter and will make a lasting difference for our children and the future of Ohio.

This is our time to chart Ohio's path farther forward as we protect our most precious resource -- our children -- so our newborn babies can grow and thrive. So our kids can be healthier and more resilient. So they learn to read, go to school, find a career they are passionate about, and ultimately grow into thriving, productive, hard-working Ohio adults!

And this is our time to band together. To work together. To be resourceful. To be innovative. To be optimistic. To inspire. And yes -- to lead.

And when we do -- this -- this will be "Ohio's finest hour."

Thank you -- and may God Bless Ohio!