

AS PREPARED STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESS  
OHIO GOVERNOR MIKE DEWINE  
OHIO STATEHOUSE  
COLUMBUS, OH  
MARCH 10, 2026

Speaker Huffman,

President McColley,

Leader Antonio and Leader Isaacsohn,

Members of the General Assembly,

Justices of the Ohio Supreme Court,

Attorney General Yost,

Auditor Faber,

Treasurer Sprague,

Lieutenant Governor Tressel,

Members of Our Cabinet,

My Fellow Citizens of Ohio....

In my first Inaugural Address, which I delivered in the beautiful Rotunda of this historic Statehouse, I promised “to be the Governor for all the people of our state -- and [that] I [would] remember each and every day that I am their servant.”

That is what I have tried to do over these past seven years -- to remember that each day, we serve the great people of Ohio and that our job is to do everything in our power to remove barriers and create opportunities so that every single Ohio citizen can live up to their God-given potential!

Whatever our administration has achieved has been with the help of so many, many people. Lieutenant Governor Tressel reminds me how important it is to begin each day with "an attitude of gratitude." And so, it is with deep gratitude that I begin my address today:

With gratitude to all of you in the General Assembly and to all who have served here in the last eight years, I thank you for your service to Ohio.

Gratitude to my former Lieutenant Governor and current U.S. Senator and his wife -- Jon and Tina Husted. We thank them for their tremendous service to our state and to our country.

And gratitude to Jim and Ellen Tressel, who took a leap of faith to join us in our mission to help all Ohioans succeed.

I want to extend my gratitude to our Cabinet and their agency staffs. You have changed lives.

You have served with excellence.

You have made Ohio stronger.

And I offer my gratitude to the troopers in our Ohio State Highway Patrol and to the members of our Ohio National Guard. You repeatedly step up when Ohioans need you and when our fellow Americans need you.

\*\*\*Today, more than 600 National Guard soldiers and airmen are deployed across the globe supporting our nation interests.

\*\*\*They have helped our communities recover after severe ice storms and tornado outbreaks in Ohio and supported our fellow Americans in Texas after last year's Guadalupe River tragedy, in Florida after Hurricane Milton, and in North Carolina after Hurricane Helene.

\*\*\*Both our Ohio Highway Patrol and National Guard have also deployed to Texas to keep our border secure and have worked with local law enforcement in Ohio to keep the public safe.

\*\*\*And when our Nation's capital needed safety support, our National Guard, once again, answered the call. We thank you all for your service.

Today, I also want to thank the Highway Patrol troopers who are in the Executive Protection Unit. You have sacrificed a lot. Fran and I will be forever grateful.

I also want to convey my gratitude to the staff of the Governor's Office, the Lieutenant Governor's Office, and the Governor's Residence. None of us could get anything done if it were not for the extremely dedicated, hard-working, and loyal people on our teams. You have made a tremendous difference.

And most importantly, my gratitude to my wife, Fran, and to our family, many of whom are with us here today. You inspire me and keep me going. Without you, I would be simply lost.

Finally, I want to thank the citizens of the State of Ohio for giving me the chance to serve as Governor. Since 1803, only 64 Ohioans have had such an honor.

In my first Inaugural Address, I also talked about my grandfather and how he planted trees late in his life -- knowing he would not live to see them grow big and tall. He planted them, nonetheless, because he believed in the future -- he believed in building a better world for generations to come. Just this past week, his great-grandson, our son John, finished tapping for

the year those same maple trees, as he does each year, to produce maple syrup to sell and for our family to enjoy.

To the members of the General Assembly -- together, we have planted many trees -- and they are, in fact, growing!

Together, we have mandated the Science of Reading so that every child in Ohio can learn to read!

Together, we have banned cell phones in every Ohio classroom, so teachers can teach and our children can learn!

And together, because of our historic investments in moms and babies, last year we reached our lowest infant mortality rate in over 20 years!

We have balanced the budget, cut taxes, and increased the amount of money in the Rainy Day Fund.

And, over the past seven years, we've been strategically focused on making Ohio the go-to state for business -- and the progress we've made is remarkable!

Last year, CNBC named Ohio as one of the "Top Five States in the Nation for Business" and "Number One in the Midwest." And just last week, Site Selection Magazine ranked Ohio as Number Three nationally for economic development projects and Number One for attracting new businesses and investments to our mid-sized cities!

Over the past few years, we have brought many companies to Ohio and secured significant expansions of Ohio-based companies, yet many of these businesses are just now starting to hire and ramp up. We have planted the seeds, and we are about to see the results!

Here are just a few examples:

Let's start with three of the California companies we have brought to Ohio.

First -- Anduril. Last week, Fran and I ate lunch with its founder, Palmer Luckey. His company is building our future defense industry right here in Ohio! They plan on starting production this year and will build up to 4,000 well-paid employees in the next few years, who will be making the world's most high-tech defense systems.

Then there's Joby Aviation. They've already started producing propellers and will soon be building flying taxis, employing up to 2,000 Ohio workers!

And Amgen, Ohio's largest life sciences and pharmaceutical manufacturing facility, will soon be adding 350 more workers to package temperature-sensitive, life-saving drugs.

Moving here from Nevada to grow in Ohio is the Sierra Nevada Corporation, who just opened two hangars for high-end aircraft engineering and expects to open two more in the next month and add 350 more workers to modify military aircraft weapons systems.

And we have not even begun to fully feel the economic impacts of these victories yet. This is truly JUST the beginning!

Because of our new Governor's Merit Scholarship, 85% of our top high school graduates are now staying in Ohio each year to go to college, increasing the chances they will get a job in Ohio and stay in Ohio. In fact, each year, approximately 700 more of these students are enrolling in Ohio colleges than before we created these scholarships!

With your help, we've also made a historic half-a-billion dollar investment in Ohio's 32 Appalachian counties, supporting the people and places in Ohio who have been overlooked for far too long by improving access to healthcare, revitalizing historic downtown districts, and transforming riverfront communities into destinations for recreation and tourism.

For the third year in a row, unintentional drug overdoses have decreased -- this time by an astounding 34%!

We have decreased the number of children in the custody of children services by 13% and improved stability for families. Last year, our highest number of foster youth graduated from high school, helping them reach their full potential.

And today, every Ohio child -- no matter where they live -- now has access to mobile mental health services so that if they are experiencing a mental health crisis, a trained professional will be at their door within an hour to help that child and their family.

At least 50,000 Ohioans with developmental disabilities depend on direct support providers so they can enjoy maximum independent living. The budget you passed last year, and I signed into law, ensures that those vital support providers get paid a competitive wage and can continue helping more Ohioans live fuller lives.

And today, Ohio families can compare nursing homes by using our nationally award-winning Nursing Home Navigator to make more informed decisions about long-term care.

From the start of our Administration, we have prioritized clean, safe water for Ohio families, bringing reliable drinking water to many Ohio communities that otherwise did not have it.

Through our innovative H2Ohio program, we have improved the quality of water in our rivers, in our streams, and in Lake Erie by partnering with thousands of farmers to reduce nutrient runoff.

And, we have built and restored hundreds of wetlands.

We all should take pride that because of many years of conservation efforts, the Trumpeter Swan and the American Bald Eagle are thriving once again in Ohio!

Finally, Ohio's 76 State Parks were just recognized as the best state park system in the United States of America!

While we can be proud of the things we have accomplished together for our fellow Ohioans, this state still has unfinished business.

## **READING**

Let's begin with reading.

Reading is the key to everything, so it is essential that children learn early about the importance of books and reading. That's why my bride -- and Ohio's First Lady -- has made it her mission to get books into the hands of Ohio's youngest children at the most crucial time in their young lives by expanding Dolly Parton's Imagination Library now into every corner of Ohio.

Let me introduce Ohio's First Lady -- Fran DeWine!

During the campaign for Governor, I remember her telling me that if -- IF -- I got elected that she wanted to really grow this program in Ohio because, at that time, it was only available to a small number of Ohio children. So, when Fran became First Lady, she got right to work! With the generous support of the General Assembly and our local partner organizations, she has taken Dolly Parton's Imagination Library statewide so that every Ohio child, between birth and age five, can have access, each month, to a free book in the mail!

With 70% of households with a child under five now receiving those books, Ohio continues to have the highest number of children enrolled in the nation! This month, nearly 419,000 Ohio children will receive a book in the mail, and since the start of our Administration, over 25 million Imagination Library books have been mailed to Ohio children!

And there's more! Today, every one of Ohio's foster children under the age of five are now automatically enrolled in the program. Just in the last year, nearly 8,000 Ohio children who were in foster or kinship care received at least one book, and in many cases, more.

Not only that, today Ohio remains the only state in America where parents can enroll their child at the hospital immediately after birth! Since last summer when we started that program, parents of more than 37,000 Ohio newborns have signed their child up right at the hospital.

And finally, a groundbreaking new study on the impact of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library confirms what we have seen anecdotally. Compared to children not enrolled in the program, those who receive these free books are nine times more likely to be read to four or more days per week and are 15 times more likely to want to read with a loved one.

Children's early literacy skills are also significantly stronger in those who receive these books compared to those who do not: Their understanding of print is three times stronger, their vocabulary is six times stronger, and their ability to recognize and manipulate spoken sounds

is seven times stronger. These are all critical skills that help children learn how to read when they enter kindergarten and put them on a path to long-term success right from the start!

Now, let's talk about the Science of Reading. I want to again thank the members of the General Assembly for standing with us -- every step of the way -- to require that the Science of Reading be taught in every single classroom in this state!

The evidence is clear that the best way to teach children how to read is through the Science of Reading. Fran and I have watched dynamic and energetic teachers use it in over 40 schools and 120 classrooms across Ohio, and it is an incredible thing to witness!

In one of the first schools we visited in 2023, Fran and I met a truly remarkable young man named Liam Kramer.

Liam was, at that time, a sophomore at Wapakoneta High School. Dyslexia had made it extremely challenging for him to read. No matter what teachers tried or what he did, Liam -- a very intelligent person -- made it all the way to ninth grade without truly learning how to read.

But, when Liam started working with a reading specialist, Nikki Barger, who taught him using the Science of Reading, things started to click, and everything changed.

Liam learned to read -- really read.

He has since graduated from high school and has a job. He owns a house. And, he's planning for his next career move -- to operate his own truck and haul livestock.

Liam says the Science of Reading changed his life.

Please welcome and give a hand to Liam Kramer and his former reading specialist Nikki Barger.

Our goal is that every Ohio child be taught by a teacher who is well conversant in the Science of Reading and who is committed to changing the culture and previous ways of teaching. While we are certainly making great progress, this is not easy. We have over 3,500 public school buildings and tens of thousands of classrooms. Retraining seasoned teachers, who were taught the wrong way and now have to learn new methods, is certainly an exercise in perseverance.

This shift takes time. However, when you look at our youngest students -- who are starting with a clean slate -- the results, much like those from the Imagination Library study, are really promising.

We have extended our focus on the Science of Reading to our youngest learners, and in 2024, we required our public pre-school programs to use it.

Every year, children going from preschool to kindergarten take our "Kindergarten Readiness Assessment." And this past fall, kindergarten readiness statewide improved by 8.3%! This represents an additional 7,300 Ohio children who entered kindergarten ready to succeed.

Certainly, some of the most important people at Ohio's colleges are those who prepare our future teachers. Because these future teachers will impact thousands -- maybe tens of thousands -- of Ohio students throughout their careers, they must be trained in the best way to teach our children to read.

The law you passed requires all our teacher colleges to train our future teachers EXCLUSIVELY in the Science of Reading! And so, we recently completed an audit, reviewing every teacher preparation program in Ohio.

We are making great progress! Today, two-thirds of those colleges are aligned with the Science of Reading. I have confidence that every college will be in full compliance by the end of this year. If they aren't, Ohio law will require them to close their program.

Congratulations on passing such an important law! It is having meaningful results. Our law is the toughest in the country. In fact, that is why people from across the country are now calling us -- because they, too, want to follow what they call "The Ohio Plan!"

We know that a complete transition to the Science of Reading is challenging and cannot be achieved overnight. And so, we are going to do the following four additional things to ensure that our kids are taught to read the right way.

1. I am directing our Department of Education and Workforce to create regional "Science of Reading Instructional Implementation Teams." They will be made up of trained experts, whose sole focus will be on helping K-12 schools to fully execute the Science of Reading in their classrooms.

Even with the requirement in the law that the Science of Reading be taught in all Ohio classrooms, the Department is finding too many instances where our high quality Science of Reading instructional materials are still on the shelf -- in the wrapper, unopened. Or, that intervention materials are not being used correctly -- if at all.

That is not acceptable. And so, we will deploy these Instructional Implementation Teams into our lowest performing schools. They will conduct need assessments and work WITH teachers and principals to make sure they have the right instructional materials, are using them appropriately, and are properly trained in the Science of Reading and have the knowledge necessary to teach it in the classroom.

2. We will also send these teams to any Ohio school that wants assurance they are effectively implementing the Science of Reading. We will assess their progress and give them help if needed.

3. I am further directing our Department of Education and Workforce to add 50 more ReadOhio coaches in the fall, extending their reach to at least 70 more schools. Currently, we have 97 coaches in 151 schools, who work side-by-side with teachers to help them unleash the full power of the Science of Reading in their classrooms -- showing them how to teach it well, how to track

each child's progress, and how to step in quickly with extra help when a student starts to fall behind.

We know that ReadOhio coaching works! Just look at Claymont Primary School in Uhrichsville in Tuscarawas County.

At the beginning of this school year, only 14% of their kindergarten students were "on track" with their reading skills for their age. That's when their kindergarten teachers began working with Christy Hopson, a fully certified ReadOhio coach. Already, the number of kindergarteners "on track" with their reading skills has jumped to 50%, and we expect those results to improve even more by this spring.

Improvement like this, in such a short period of time, takes great coaches, strong principals, and dedicated teachers. So, please join me in recognizing Claymont Primary's ReadOhio coach Christy Hopson, Principal Kelly Cook, and Kindergarten teacher, Amber Roberts, for their incredible work.

4. To build a broader and more cost-effective coaching pipeline, I am also directing the Department, with the help of our Educational Service Centers, to offer free ReadOhio coach training and credentialing to literacy coaches who are already employed by the school district. With those additional credentials, they then will be able to train even more coaches at their schools.

One of the biggest barriers to children not learning to read is not being able to see clearly. While the law requires that all grade school children in Ohio be screened to determine if they need a full eye exam, only a small fraction of the kids who need one -- only one in four -- actually receive one and get glasses if they need them.

Based on vision screening data from Ohio elementary schools, every year, approximately 37,000 children in grades K-3 are referred for comprehensive eye exams. Yet shockingly, approximately 29,000 of them never actually receive an exam or glasses if needed.

That is a stunning and scary number.

And so, with your help and investment, we recently launched OhioSEE -- a FREE, brand new children's eyesight pilot program for kids in kindergarten through third grade in the 15 Ohio counties with the greatest needs. Vision providers either bring a mobile vision van to the school or they will set up equipment in the school building so that students can receive eye exams from an optometrist.

Then, if the child needs glasses, they get to pick out their own frames -- and their color -- right there! In a few weeks, the van comes back, and kids get fitted with their new glasses.

Fran and I have visited five elementary schools in the past few weeks that are using the program, and it is pure joy to watch these children put on their glasses for that first time and to be able to

see the world clearly! We recently met Tesannya Brown, a second grader at Prairie Lincoln Elementary School in Columbus. Here's what she said when she got her new glasses:

"They help me look at things much better! When I didn't have my glasses... I felt very confused. I was getting scared trying to read a book, and I didn't have anything to help me. Now, the glasses help me see the small words -- and I don't feel scared anymore."

No child should ever be scared to read because they can't see the words on the page!

Today, I am urging all public and private superintendents and school leaders in those 15 counties to sign up your school to get this free help. Just send an email to OhioSEE through the Ohio Department of Health at ODH.Ohio.gov. By doing this, you will be changing lives.

## **CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM**

Another significant barrier to a child's future success is simply not being at school.

Last year, one out of every four of our Ohio school children were chronically absent, which means they missed the equivalent of nearly one month of school.

If we want our children to thrive, they need to be in school. Students with good attendance are three times more likely to be proficient readers, nearly four times more likely to be proficient at math, almost 12 times more likely to graduate on time, and ultimately then to be much more likely to get a job after high school.

Chronic absenteeism is not just a school problem. It is a community problem, and it will take parents and whole communities to drive the solutions. Just look at East Cleveland!

By asking the right questions, East Cleveland school officials learned that many students were not skipping school because they didn't care. Rather, they were facing real barriers -- transportation challenges, health issues, or difficult situations at home. So, the district changed its approach.

East Cleveland uses attendance data to identify students at risk of chronic absenteeism. If a student misses just a couple of days, staff reaches out immediately to the family to find out why and how the school can help, sometimes visiting families in their homes. They work to find the root causes of absenteeism, connect families with resources, and strengthen relationships with the community.

The results speak for themselves. East Cleveland reduced chronic absenteeism by over 10% last year! And, at the same time, reading proficiency among their third graders went up by 10.5%!

Please join me in congratulating East Cleveland Superintendent, Dr. Henry Pettiegrew, and East Cleveland Mayor Sandra Morgan -- and the entire city of East Cleveland -- for their commitment to keeping students in class and ready to learn.

Every school district in Ohio can learn from East Cleveland, and it all starts with having a plan. That is why, in our past budget, we included language to ensure that every school district in Ohio, starting this fall, will be required to have a clear attendance policy. This policy must identify students who are at risk, offer ways to step in early and work directly with families to understand and remove barriers to attendance, and increase the level of support for students who miss school.

Further, we know that having real-time data is crucial. So, today I am announcing that on April 15<sup>th</sup>, our Department of Education and Workforce will launch a new “Statewide Attendance Dashboard.”

This new tool will provide parents -- and the public -- with simple, fast, and transparent attendance data each week for every district and school. This will offer early information about the effectiveness of attendance strategies, so that schools, districts, and communities can take actionable steps to improve attendance.

Of course, improving school attendance is going to take more than data. Students have to want to go to school. For many students, career tech is what lights up their world and keeps them in school!

This underscores the General Assembly’s invaluable support for career tech during our Administration. For example, together in 2023, we invested an additional \$300 million dollars to build new career tech facilities, expand existing ones, and allow schools to purchase new state-of-the-art equipment. These efforts have opened up 10,000 new seats for career tech students in Ohio.

Now, that’s the good news. However, we still have over 13,000 students on waiting lists for their preferred programs. So, we must continue pushing to create more opportunities for our students who want to pursue career tech. Not only will this help students discover their interests -- and stay in school -- but it will also put them on a path to a rewarding career.

Another way we are keeping kids in school is by creating school-based health centers. We now have 135 of these centers across Ohio that thousands of children can access right on the school’s campus, saving thousands of hours of missed class time. Because of our investment in this past budget, even more will be opening very soon.

## **RECESS & TEAM TRESSEL FITNESS CHALLENGE**

Another issue that we must address for every Ohioan to reach their God-given potential is developing healthy habits.

In his 2024 book, *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt advocates not only for cell phone bans in schools, but also for restoring what he calls a “play-based childhood.” He argues that unstructured free play helps support a child’s mental health and the development of important life skills, such as creativity, collaboration, resilience, and social skills.

An age-old form of unstructured free play for children is recess! But today, Ohio schools may count up to only two 15-minute recess periods for students in kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade as part of their school day. This is simply not enough.

Recess gives children the chance to get outside and just be kids. It increases their physical activity. It improves their memory, attention, and concentration. It helps them stay on-task in the classroom. It reduces disruptive behavior in the classroom. And, it improves children's ability to learn how to share and negotiate.

I commend Representatives Tom Young and Melanie Miller for the provision they have included in a bill that would double the amount of recess time for schools from 30 minutes to 60 minutes per day and would require these recess periods for all students in Kindergarten through 8th grade.

No one understands the importance of children being physically active more than Lieutenant Governor Jim Tressel.

What a whirlwind of a year it has been for the Tressels! I'm not sure they knew what was in store when Fran and I showed up at their home and asked them to join this Administration -- but I can tell you, we are sure glad they did!

Please give a hand to Lieutenant Governor Tressel and Mrs. Tressel, who is in the Gallery with Fran.

Last year, I asked Jim to come up with a challenge for our schools to promote physical fitness. Well -- he did more than create a challenge. He started a movement!

At the beginning of this past school year, he launched the "Team Tressel Fitness Challenge" to help students in grades three through eight to build lifelong healthy habits around fitness, nutrition, and sleep, while also encouraging an "attitude of gratitude" during quiet times or periods of reflection.

The energy and enthusiasm that he and his all-star team of "Challenge Captains" have generated is absolutely remarkable! Today, more than 390,000 students in over 1,300 schools across Ohio are participating!

The Lieutenant Governor has enlisted the help of former Ohio State Buckeye greats and legendary Ohio athletes to encourage students throughout the fitness challenge and to serve as role models. We are thrilled that a few of them have joined us today!

Please give a round of applause to Braxton Miller, Roy Hall Jr., who gave a wonderful invocation, DeVier Posey, Donnie Evedge, and Drew and Melissa Basil.

The Lieutenant Governor and his Challenge Captains have visited over 100 schools across Ohio, holding pep rallies to show the kids how to do some of the exercises and to hear from students about their progress setting and achieving their health goals. I hear that the atmosphere at these

event is electric and that many of you in this room have attended one of the Lieutenant Governor's Fitness Challenge assemblies and done wall sits and planks and jumping jacks and push-ups!

I, on the other hand, have not done it yet!

When a few hundred third graders are counting your push-ups out-loud, that's real accountability! And, it turns out push-ups are bipartisan -- everyone struggles equally!

If you have attended a Team Tressel Fitness Challenge school visit, please stand up! By attending these assemblies, you showed students something very important -- that it's not about being an athlete. It's about being the best version of you. And that's what really matters.

Just look at Braxton Maenle, an eighth-grader at Gibsonburg Middle School in Sandusky County. When Team Tressel came to his school and started the challenge, Braxton set a goal to run a full lap around the track without stopping -- something he had never done before.

Day after day, he practiced. He prepared. And, most importantly, he didn't give up.

When the day came for Braxton to run that lap around the track, his entire class ran with him -- cheering him on every step of the way!

Not only did Braxton run that lap without stopping, the Village of Gibsonburg named his whole class "Citizens of the Year!"

Please welcome Braxton Maenle, who is in the Gallery today, and give him -- and his eighth grade class -- a round of applause!

This is what the Team Tressel Fitness Challenge is really about -- confidence, encouragement, and learning that we accomplish more together than we ever could alone. So, let's build on Braxton's example.

Members of the General Assembly, we ask you today to work with us to make this challenge -- this movement -- a permanent opportunity for our students in Ohio, so that every child -- every year -- can discover how good it feels to become the best version of themselves.

## **CELL PHONES/SCREENTIME/SOCIAL MEDIA**

A child's mental health is equally important to their physical health, and one of the most meaningful things we have done together is ban cell phones in our K-12 schools!

The culture change in our schools is miraculous! Our children are interacting and talking with each other again. School lunch rooms are vibrant, loud, and echoing with laughter!

Our kids are getting their lives back! And so, we must remain vigilant in ensuring that each and every one of our thousands of school buildings are enforcing the cell phone ban.

To do anything else lessens our children's ability to learn.

But, what is happening to our young people today goes beyond phones in schools. It's a larger issue about their access to screens and phones and social media and the Internet when they are outside of the classroom.

Just listen to these statistics:

In 1985, 35% of American teenagers said they read almost every day in their spare time, while only 15% said they hardly ever read in their spare time. Today, it is completely reversed. Only 15% of teenagers say they read in their spare time, and nearly 50% say they hardly ever do.

So then, what are they doing with their time?

Increasing numbers of teens are using social media more than seven hours a day -- seven hours a day!

Fifty-nine percent of children say they have seen a violent video online this year.

Sixty percent of children ages eight to 17 say they are concerned about someone using AI to make inappropriate pictures of them.

Excessive screen time is really a thief. Social media is a thief. All stealing from our children the most precious thing in life -- time.

Hours on a cell phone or an Ipad or a Chromebook is time our children are not outside playing with their friends.

Time they are not getting enough sleep.

Time they are not reading books.

Time they are not exercising or playing sports.

Time they are not learning real social skills and so many of the other important skills that will help them live up to their full potential.

Kids grow up so fast and this stolen time -- these lost opportunities -- can never be recaptured.

Most of these problems are best addressed by parents. But, there are things that we, as public officials, can do to help parents protect their children. In fact, some of these things can't be done without our actions.

Today, I am asking you to pass legislation to do the following things:

1. Make it illegal in the State of Ohio to possess, create, or distribute child pornography that is created by Artificial Intelligence, much like the bill sponsored by Senator Blessing and Senator Johnson.
2. Hold tech companies accountable for allowing their Artificial Intelligence to encourage, assist, endorse, or instruct anyone -- much less a child -- to kill themselves, harm themselves, harm others, or kill others. Ohio law needs real consequences. The Ohio Attorney General and County Prosecutors must have clear legal tools to hold these tech companies criminally and civilly accountable.
3. I am asking you to pass a law to require cell phone and tech companies to automatically implement parental control features to empower parents to easily monitor and control what content their kids are using, when they are using it, and for how long.

But, this is not just about enacting new laws. There are so many other things that parents and our communities can do to help give our children back their childhoods! Something as simple as putting your child's phone away an hour before going to sleep, which Lieutenant Governor Tressel is urging children to do in the Fitness Challenge, can be the first step. Or parents can restrict their children's devices so that they cannot have access to apps between 10pm and 6am.

Fran and I were recently talking to a young English teacher, and he told us about the impact excessive screen time is having on his students and their lack of interest reading whole books -- instead of just bite-sized passages. Here's what he said: "I truly think we've advanced too much in technology and need to [just] step back to a more analog model in almost every aspect of our daily life."

We can't roll back the clock on technology, but all of us, as adults, can work together to control this technology to better protect all our children. It is our moral obligation to do so.

### **PRIMARY SEATBELT LAW**

In 2022, standing in this very spot, I asked you to pass a bill strengthening distracted driving laws in Ohio. Let's look at the results.

If you compare the first two years of enforcement of this law to the two years before the enforcement began, Ohio has had 18,000 fewer crashes and 280 fewer traffic deaths!

Thank you -- thank you for saving these lives!

We now have another great opportunity to save lives. We can do this with a primary seatbelt law.

We know that in states that have passed such a law, seatbelt compliance goes up -- and lives are saved. Right now, 35 states have a primary seatbelt law, including our neighbors in Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, and West Virginia. Some of the other states include Florida, Texas, South Carolina, Georgia, Arkansas, and Tennessee.

Their laws have saved lives.

Today, 88% of people in Ohio already wear seatbelts. The 12% of the people in Ohio who don't wear seatbelts, though, represent more than 60% of those killed in car crashes. Let me repeat that: Only 12% of Ohioans do not wear seatbelts, yet they represent more than 60% of the fatalities in car accidents.

And then, there is the duty an Ohio driver has to children in the backseat of their car. Picture this: In Ohio, under current law, an officer -- incredibly -- does not have the authority to stop a car solely for seeing a child old enough to be out of a car seat crawling or jumping around unbuckled in the backseat.

We must change the law to protect our kids!

Now, the main argument I hear about such a law is that those who choose to travel unbelted are only endangering themselves. But, we all know that is not true.

You have all likely seen the commercial with Lieutenant Governor Tressel, where he talks about the importance of wearing a seatbelt -- not just to protect you -- but to protect everyone else in the car. You may also remember the statistic he cites -- that an unbelted passenger in a crash at 50 miles per hour can be propelled into another passenger, with eight times the force of a 240-pound linebacker running at full speed!

Further, according to the Ohio Insurance Institute, crashes involving those who are unbelted cost Ohioans roughly \$2.8 billion dollars annually through medical bills, lost productivity, property damage, and more. The vast majority of these costs are borne -- not by the unbelted person -- but by all the rest of us.

But -- enacting a primary seatbelt law is about so much more than economic losses or even the safety of those individuals who are okay with risking their own lives by not wearing a seatbelt. It is about protecting families, communities, and the people who depend on us every single day.

As we saw with the distracted driving bill, the law is a great motivator, and we know that more people will buckle up if we pass a primary seatbelt law.

Just one more fact. Our Ohio Traffic Safety Office looked at data from surrounding states with primary seatbelt laws and calculated that if Ohio were to adopt stronger seatbelt laws, the resulting increase in seatbelt use would, on average, save five lives each and every month.

These are mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, children, friends whose lives can be saved.

## **CONCLUSION**

People knew that my dad knew a lot about trees. They would ask: "Dick, when is the best time to plant a tree?" His answer was always the same: "Now!"

Well then, now is the time to teach our kids how to read!

Now is the time to get our kids back into the classroom!

Now is the time to protect our kids from the harms of too much screentime.

Now is the time to commit to the physical and mental wellbeing of our kids through more recess and a permanent statewide fitness program!

And now is the time to protect all Ohioans with a primary seatbelt law!

Fran and I are optimists! And when we at the seal of our great State, we see a rising -- not a setting -- sun. That rising sun represents hope -- hope for a future of unlimited possibilities! And each tree we that we plant represents that hope for the future.

I will leave you with something Lieutenant Governor Tressel shared with me. He said that when he was leaving his legendary coaching days at OSU, a long-time mentor of his told him this:

“Your greatest accomplishments and your greatest days are ahead of you -- IF -- if you believe that they are.”

Well, I have never believed more strongly that Ohio’s GREATEST accomplishments and GREATEST days are ahead of us!

The GREATEST days for our workers!

The GREATEST days for our children!

And, the GREATEST DAYS for EVERY Ohio family!

May God bless America, and may God bless Ohio.