

Testimony on House Bill 305
SCHOOL FINANCING
Before the House Finance Committee
The Honorable Scott Oelslager, Chair
By Susan Kaeser, LWV Ohio Specialist
November 16, 2020

Chairman Oelslager, Chairman Callender, Vice Chair Scherer, Rep. Cera, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share this testimony. My name is Susan Kaeser. I am a public education advocate, a kindergarten volunteer, and the education specialist for the League of Women Voters of Ohio. I reside in Cleveland Heights where the levy cycle and the unfettered drain of public dollars to private education has driven our schools to the brink. This issue is personal to me. The need for action is urgent.

LWVO supports Sub. HB 305. The League has advocated for a constitutional system of school funding since the 1997 *DeRolph* decision. If approved, this plan when fully funded, would meet constitutional muster and truly advance equal opportunity.

Both the content of this legislation and the process for developing its recommendations make it worthy of support and ready for action during this legislative session. The plan was driven by a vision of education quality that exceeds simply offering the basics, and it was designed to make it possible for the elected school boards in the districts that you represent, to responsibly plan for their districts. It is a solid blueprint that not only addresses the cornerstone issues of adequacy and equity, but it will bring predictability, fairness, and order to a dysfunctional system.

LWVO commends Reps. Patterson, Speaker Cupp, and Rep. Scherer for leading a bi-partisan, information-driven, and comprehensive exploration of how to best fund public education in Ohio so all children, regardless of where they live or their unique needs, have access to a public school that has sufficient resources to provide a high-quality education that is appropriate for the 21st century. We appreciate the work of this tenacious team that labored on for nearly three years, despite the pandemic, and the commitment to fairness that is evident in the proposal. It is hard to imagine a more complete, objective, or comprehensive approach to this crucial state policy.

Given 610 school districts and more than 1.7 million children, one size does not fit all. Addressing this diversity and creating a coherent plan that benefits every community is a tall order. The Fair School Funding Plan is up to the challenge. By building the base cost on the actual cost of education, by factoring in both property wealth and income to the assessment of local capacity to fund the base cost, the fairness of the state and local partnership is achieved. The addition of the categorial costs then addresses multiple costs that are unique to the children within a district, respecting even variations in transportation because of the geography of the community. The architects of the plan have achieved a

kind of sensitivity to that variation that meets the challenge of fairness in support. The success of this plan, like a puzzle, requires adoption of the plan as a whole. So please, as you assess the plan, look at the whole picture and respect the interlocking details that make it work.

Another critical feature of this proposal is the end of deduction funding for students who receive public funds to attend a school not operated by their district. Deduction funding increases inequality across communities, drives up reliance on property taxes frequently in communities that can least afford it, and deprives our neediest students of essential state funds. While the LWVO believes public funds should only be used for public schools that are accountable to elected boards of education, this change is appropriate and essential to making the system fair.

Please act now. It would be a disservice to the residents of the state to squander the outcome of this process, and put off even longer the design of a fair system. As many local school districts reach a breaking point, the need is now. And as we face the daunting challenges of recovering from the educational and financial losses inflicted by the pandemic, the need for action is even more pressing. The budget process is clearly not the venue for the exhaustive analysis, transparency, and objectivity needed to craft a plan that involves this level of detail. Real deliberation is not feasible in the rushed and burdened budget process.

While school districts urgently need the help provided by this legislation, we know it is not feasible to fully fund it in the next budget cycle. But a six-year phase in with substantial annual progress, is practical and achievable. It is an opportunity for the legislature to reclaim its role as the primary resource for a high-quality system of public schools.

The LWVO bases its support for legislation on positions approved by all members. This legislation is in line with multiple positions.

1. Funding of public education is a shared responsibility of state government and local school districts.
2. The distribution formula should compensate for variations among school districts in their local ability to raise local revenue, and should be calculated to reflect income wealth of school districts, not just property wealth.
3. State aid should be based on the actual cost of mandated programs and meeting the educational needs of the children within a district.
4. Public funds should only be used for public schools that are accountable to locally elected boards of education.
5. This plan meets the requirements from the DeRolph case that we secure a constitutional system of funding.

Our system of public schools is part of the critical infrastructure of our state and our local communities. They are essential and worthy of the investment of our public funds. Like the vote, our system of public schools values every person. An educated citizenry is the cornerstone of a functioning democracy. A high-quality system of public schools that is free and open to all is an essential resource for the citizens of our state, our communities, and the economic and social health of our residents. It's a worthwhile investment of our public funds.

We urge you to support Sub. HB 305 as introduced, and to act on it now.