

Testimony from Joan Spoerl November 2020

Honorable Chair and Members of the House Finance Committee,

My name is Joan Spoerl and I am an early childhood professional and former teacher, proud resident of Cleveland Heights and parent of a 10th grader at Heights High School who has attended our public schools since kindergarten. Thank you for allowing me to testify today to express my congratulations to all involved in offering you this long sought, wonderful opportunity to fulfill the oath you swore to the state constitution and to the majority of Ohio's families and youngest citizens, by passing Substitute House Bill 305 and Senate Bill 376. Just think of how public schools, the children and families they serve and Ohio communities can thrive when liberated from the constraints imposed by the current approach. When you demonstrate your loyalty to them by investing in them as the constitution requires, they can plan, build and grow, free from the uncertainties and inefficiencies that come with the current laws.

Do you want to strengthen all Ohio communities and economic development throughout Ohio? Do you want Ohio to possess a strong, literate, educated and nimble workforce? Do you want to attract and retain businesses large and small throughout the state? I think the answer is yes but the current approach runs counter to your constitutional duty and these goals. Let me explain why it is critical for you to be accountable to your constitutional oath by passing the proposed legislation now.

When I listened to testimony in February relating to EdChoice, what struck me was the oft-repeated themes from public school supporters from every kind of community in Ohio - small, medium, large, rural and urban. Rural community members described their public schools as the heart or center of their community. Many voiced pride about how their public schools welcome and serve all who need them, turn away no one, weaving together all kinds of children and families, forming a beautiful tapestry of community.

But then I also learned from others' testimony that my community was not unique in finding its beautiful fabric too often weakened or rent by the legislature's failure to meet the mandate of the constitution. I heard about the divisions created in all kinds of communities, by the need for levy campaigns to simply keep up with inflation and the unfortunate consequences of budget cuts when those levies fail. I also heard Republican and Democratic legislators and citizens testify that the state report card is flawed and meaningless. As it has functioned, it has countered, not supported the mandate.

To be clear: the legislature is constitutionally mandated to provide adequate and equitable funding so every student in every public school district has the benefit of a sound education regardless of the community's capacity to fund its public schools. Such a constitutional imperative should be your first and dominant duty. Instead, my district's school administration, board and advocates are nearly constantly engaged in a Sisphysean struggle as they try to manage challenges posed by both state and federal policies. Instead of being supported by the state, they face the awful dilemma of cutting the budget and compromising the well-being of the children they serve or asking for more dollars from local property owners, many who are struggling themselves, just to keep pace with inflation.

Surely it would pay countless dividends to end this dilemma by properly funding schools and strengthening Ohio communities and the future workforce.

Finally, as an early childhood professional, I must plead one more case for reform. The research on the importance of strong early childhood supports is clear and explains why districts like mine face additional challenges in advancing their students. According to Groundwork Ohio's Ohio Early Childhood Race and Rural Equity Report:

"Children who start behind, usually stay behind... The data is extremely predictive ... kindergarten readiness predicts third grade reading achievement, which...predicts eighth grade math achievement... predicts high school graduation...(etc.).

The legislation before you would strengthen early childhood programs and help to fund a robust system of public schools, open to all, with compelling programming that fosters life-long learning.

Please demonstrate your fealty to the constitution and the seriousness of your duty to your constituents by supporting this legislation and strengthening the fabric of communities in Ohio.