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**House Primary and Secondary Education Committee
H.B. 8 - Opponent Testimony**

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Good afternoon, Chair Bird, Vice Chair Fowler-Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson and members of the Ohio House Primary and Secondary Education Committee. My name is Alison Paxson, and I am a Senior Policy Associate for the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio (CDF-Ohio). With more than four decades of advocacy on behalf of Ohio's children, it is the mission of the Children's Defense Fund to champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, and ensure their access to health care, quality education, and nutritional wellness. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in opposition to H.B. 8.

As an organization, CDF-Ohio strongly supports policies grounded in data and research that empower parents and caregivers to be meaningfully engaged with their children's schools, educators, and learning. Such policies are a pinnacle of [Ohio's Whole Child Framework](#), a student-centered approach to education that emphasizes the role of families and the community in providing safe environments and rich learning experiences for all students. This framework has strengthened partnerships between families, schools, and communities to work together to address the unique needs of their local districts, and in practice this may look like schools partnering with community health care providers to improve access to behavioral or physical health services, feeding children free meals during the summer months, or building Family Resource Centers to connect families with needed assistance. These trusting partnerships between schools, families, and community are the hallmark of a quality educational experience and a research-driven response to the significant challenges students and families are experiencing, especially as nearly 1 in 5 children in Ohio are experiencing poverty and therefore struggle to access health care, nutrition, housing, transportation, and other basic needs necessary to thriving in school and beyond.

However, H.B. 8 would not complement these efforts and would in fact likely undermine them by: compromising the safety of students both inside and outside of classrooms; creating a gateway for censorship at the behest oftentimes of a single individual's discomfort; and



fostering a toxic culture of eroding trust for and intimidation of educators to the detriment of the profession and the children they make it their life's work to serve.

Supporters of this bill point to it as a solution to curtailed parent empowerment and declining trust regarding what schools are teaching and the student supports they provide, but H.B. 8's proposals fall flat in the face of actual data and evidence that shows the supermajority of Ohio parents with children in our K-12 schools perceive their own agency and the work being undertaken in their local schools very differently.

Last year, Children's Defense Fund-Ohio commissioned [a statewide survey](#) in partnership with Baldwin Wallace Community Research Institute (BWCRI) to accurately measure parents' attitudes towards core components of Ohio's Whole Child Framework, capturing their views on school nutrition programs, school-based health care services, social emotional learning (SEL), and their trust in their children's teachers. Over 1,300 Ohio parents with children currently attending Ohio K-12 schools were surveyed, 84% of which were registered voters with a most respondents identifying as Republicans (34%) (with 30% identifying as Independent and Democrat respectively).

The findings of this survey made it abundantly clear: It doesn't matter where they live, how much money they make, their race, religion, political affiliation, gender, education, or age – Ohio parents and caregivers overwhelmingly support a whole child education approach, want equity to be prioritized in schools, and trust their children's educators to be partners in their children's success.

In fact, 90% of parents surveyed agreed with the statement: **"If I have a question about what my child(ren) is learning, I feel comfortable reaching out to their teacher,"** and nine in ten parents overall said they see their child's teacher as **"a positive role model"** and similar percentages agreed that they trust their child's teacher to:

- Teach their child age-appropriate content (93%)
- Support their academic learning and success (92%)
- Have high expectations of their child (89%)

As it remains ungrounded in what the data tells us, H.B. 8 is more political in its ambitions than it is practical. Its proposals to adopt parental notification policies for ["sexually explicit content"](#) and [student mental, emotional, and physical health care services](#) are wholly unnecessary,



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because Ohio already has regulations that govern parental notice, review, and opting out of instruction.

Ultimately, the message I have to share is one of hope: there is unity and common ground among Ohio parents and what they want for their children's education. Parents are aligned on the importance of continuing to work together with their children's schools to strengthen, not counter, the support their children rely on both at home and in school. As a state, we would do better by our children and our future if we focused less on fear tactics that divide us (as imbued in this "parent's rights" bill and others that mirror it nationally) and instead on what strengthens the partnerships and institutions that unite us around the well-being of our children.

In the [words of a parent surveyed](#): *"I am a firm believer in "knowledge is power." Being "exposed" (ideally, educated) on this or any subject invokes critical thinking and a sense of community, appreciation and ultimately a healthy respect and acceptance for those that are not like us. Young children are exceptionally perceptive and having open, honest instruction on these topics would help them navigate the social-emotional concept at a young age of: the beauty of differences and cement the concept that what unites us as humans is always far greater than what divides us."*

A "parent's rights" bill that does not reflect the needs of all students growing up in our diverse and democratic society, nor the on-the-ground reality of school operations and parent involvement, or even the true perspectives of the broad majority of parents who actually have children in our K-12 schools is not a "parent's rights" bill at all. I urge you to reject H.B. 8 and instead turn your focus and our state's resources towards policies that further bolster the common ground we all - especially our students - would benefit from. Thank you and I welcome any questions.