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Proponent Testimony – HB 33

Senate Education Committee

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Chairman Brenner, Vice Chairman O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, my name is Susie Kaeser and I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts with the committee about public education funding and HB 33.

I live in Cleveland Heights where I have been a classroom volunteer for more than 30 years at the elementary school that my adult children attended. I am part of an 8-person team of tutors who help kindergarteners from two classrooms learn their letters and letter sounds. We give 16 children daily help and the kind of personal attention that one teacher cannot deliver to 25 children who are learning how to go to school.

Each of them is unique. All are eager to unlock the mystery of the written word. Many already carry the weight of the world. They like to talk to adults. They motivate me to stand up for well-funded, high quality, engaging, calm, supportive and nonjudgmental public education.

Resources have a significant effect on what we can offer our children. Since 1935 LWVO has advocated for the state to invest in public education, and to do so in a way that guarantees that regardless of a local community's capacity to fund high quality education, sufficient funds are available everywhere. This is consistent with the state Constitution which calls on the state to operate a thorough and efficient system of common schools.

As you know, the state has persistently fallen short of funding schools in a way that reflects this systematic commitment to all of our communities, youth and taxpayers. LWVO urges you to make this the moment when more than 1.4 million children and the public schools they depend on have the full support of our legislature. We urge you to make the public education a top priority in this budget, so our youngsters and communities are not punished for lacking sufficient local resources to provide our future voters, employees, and community leaders what they need to have hope and to thrive.

Large sections of our state – more than 46 counties – rely almost exclusively on public schools for K-12 education. In these counties, the public school is often the only public institution, only resource to support families and children, the center of community life, and the largest employer. Schools are a source of unity and connection – not just education. They are safe places and helpful places. The taxpayers in these counties are often the least able to fund their schools. They need for their state taxes to fund the institutions that contribute to the quality of their lives: their public schools.

These communities should not have to compete with private schools for public funds. Private schools do not play a role in these places, and when they do they weaken the public system by taking away scarce public funds and reducing the economies of scale that allow for a robust education.

We have waited way too long to bring equity and fairness to our children and to all communities that share in funding this amazing enterprise, and benefit from its existence and success. We have a public system and we regulate it carefully to ensure teachers are professional, student rights are honored, and public funds are invested with safeguards for taxpayers. We have a carefully constructed system that not only seeks to offer equal opportunity, but is accountable to the public.

Public schools have been losing ground financially, while student needs have increased and expectations for what it means to be prepared for the 21st century have become more rigorous. Schools are forced to cut programs, and ask local taxpayers to take up the slack caused by inadequate state support.

Education changes lives. And for some people it works miracles. But we cannot ask schools to solve problems that they did not create and then blame them when they don't. However, if we invest in them and communicate that each of them matters to the leaders of our state, we can expect to see more children experiencing a robust education, one that can help them grow.

I find it disheartening that lawmakers are fast to denigrate our public schools using faulty metrics to justify their cruelty and to prioritize individual rights over the essential purpose of our public education system: serving the common good. This civic purpose is the reason we join together as taxpayers to advance institutions that serve all of us, that unite our diverse society in common purpose, that recognize that we are interconnected and our well-being is shared.

The state budget expresses what we care about as a state. HB 33 demonstrates a strong commitment to public education. The formula is well designed and takes a thoughtful approach to estimating the cost of educating the typical child, as well the extra costs of serving children who have additional challenges. Five years have passed since the plan was crafted and cost does not sit still. It's prudent to update the data used to make these calculations. Solving the problem of fair funding in a state as diverse as this is nothing short of a miracle, yet something that will always need corrections.

As you decide how to invest in education, it is important to LWVO that you make public education the priority, to sustain the fair school funding formula, to adjust the cost basis, and to establish a nonpartisan entity that can monitor the plan for problems and can propose remedies.

Education choices outside the public system do not benefit everyone, are not accountable, and need not be honest or true. They satisfy individual preferences, but do not serve the common good. This is the unique and critical role and contribution of our public system. Public education is the foundation for self-governance, for democracy.

For public education to provide the education that will prepare our graduates for the 21st century workplace that many of your colleagues find to be their priority, or for the decisions that our citizens must be able to make in our shrinking world, or that will keep people from leaving our state, our public schools need adequate resources. It is not sustainable to continue to use property taxes to fill holes. This only perpetuates unequal opportunity for kids and unequal costs for local communities.

This is the budget cycle when equity and adequacy in school funding can become real in Ohio. What a wonderful day that would be for our youth, our state, and our collective futures if every student in our public system had the benefit of the same financial support and the opportunities that adequate resources can provide. I urge you to support the public education investments and policies proposed in HB33.