

Testimony on House Bill 33
Senate Education Committee
135th General Assembly

Hello Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide input on House Bill 33. My name is Nicole Marshall. I live in Westerville, Ohio with my husband, Jason and 12 year old daughter, Alyssa. I am the Treasurer and CFO of the Westerville City School District, which is a large suburban traditional public school district just a 20 minute drive north east of here. We serve approximately 14,600 students that speak 65 different languages and represent 64 different countries. Over 30% of our students are economically disadvantaged. Our annual operating budget is just over \$200 million and we employ nearly 2,000 people that provide approximately \$2.7 million in state income taxes and \$2 million in local income taxes.

I have been with Westerville since 2018. Prior to that, I was in Fairborn City Schools and Kettering City Schools. I also spent seven years working at the Auditor of State's Office. I have been a public employee for all of my professional career, which started in 2005.

One thing I learned and worked to ensure while at the Auditor's Office was that our public school districts are entrusted with taxpayer dollars and that the state of Ohio takes that very seriously. So much so that we as public entities are subject to annual audits, annual financial forecasting and reporting, open meetings and public records laws, Education Management Information System reporting, the Uniform School Accounting System, ethics rules and financial disclosure, among other things. Our governing boards are elected by our community. Our tax levies are approved by a vote of our community. Everything we do requires transparency and compliance for the use of taxpayer dollars, as it should.

Looking at Ohio's sunshine laws, we have what is affectionately called the "[Yellow Book](#)". Ohio's Attorney General updates this document every year and public entities are required to receive training on it and comply with everything in it. It is 145 pages of guidance on how to comply with the Ohio public records and open meetings laws. We know that this is necessary because we are entrusted with taxpayer dollars. However, while our private school counterparts are also receiving taxpayer dollars, they are not subject to Ohio's sunshine laws. I personally respond to hundreds of records requests each year that run anywhere from our budget documents to our personnel files. I am required to produce these documents by anyone who requests them, promptly, regardless of where they are from - even out-of-state requestors.

Now let's look at our annual audits. We spend about six months out of the year (after we close our fiscal year) engaging with our auditors. They look at everything to ensure best practices and compliance with all of the laws and regulations to which we as public school districts are subject. The state's audit manual is the Ohio Compliance Supplement, which is a document that is updated annually. It includes three chapters:

- [Chapter 1 - Direct Laws \(111 pages\)](#)
- [Chapter 2 - Indirect Laws & Statutorily Mandated Tests \(124 pages\)](#)

- [Chapter 3 - Stewardship \(40 pages\)](#)

It also includes the [Implementation Guide for Legal Compliance Auditing in Ohio \(97 pages\)](#).

This is another thing to which our private counterparts are not subject, even though they too are receiving taxpayer dollars.

Next, I want to discuss the [Ohio EMIS Manual](#). EMIS is the Education Management Information System. This is the system public school districts must use to report all of our data to the state through the Ohio Department of Education. The Ohio EMIS Manual is 863 pages and updated annually. We report everything from student information to financial data through this system.

[You will find the list of collection requests we have each year for the Data Collector included with my testimony.](#)

Through this data collection by the state, ODE is able to publish anything anyone would want to know about our public school district. An example of this is the [District Profile Report](#) attached to this testimony. With this report we can select any district to compare to similar districts and state averages. This document includes all 606 traditional public school districts. It shows demographic, personnel, property value and tax, local effort, operating expenditures, revenue, and a district's financial status data. All of that information is available for public consumption on ODE's website for easy access and transparency because public school districts are entrusted with taxpayer dollars. Our private counterparts are not subject to this same scrutiny.

These are just a few examples of all of the compliance to which traditional public school districts are subject, but private schools are not.

Our ask is that you do not expand private school vouchers. Private schools are not subject to the same compliance requirements and they have no oversight in how taxpayer dollars are spent. For this reason alone, they should not be funded with taxpayer money.

We are also asking you to continue the fair school funding plan with updated inputs for FY2022. As you know, inflation remains high, which has caused a large increase in the cost of doing business. Our district has strategically utilized federal funds to lessen the burden on our taxpayers. These funds are expiring next year, which will shift over 10 million dollars in expenditures back to our general operating fund.

Our district is fortunate to have a community that supports its public schools. We know that is not always the case and we never take that for granted. In 2009 our district had to move a payroll date due to low fund balances and cash flow issues. In 2011 our district failed an operating levy and had to make severe cuts to our programs. Cuts included after school programs, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, elective courses, and transportation services.

These cuts were felt all across our community. I have spoken with an adult who was in middle school at that time. They remembered not being able to participate in extracurricular activities or any of the elective courses that their older siblings had enjoyed. I have spoken with another

adult who was a parent with a student in the district. They had to work to provide their own transportation at that time due to the cuts made, which impacted their hours with their employer. These are just two examples of the impact felt.

In the over 18 years I have been in this profession, I have seen many school districts' funds fluctuate significantly in that time. Westerville is a perfect example of a district that has seen fluctuation with reductions in state funding, increases in state funding, levies failed, levies passed and increased costs.

School funding has never been consistent in my time doing this. With the phase-in of the Fair School Funding Plan, Westerville City School District continues to be underfunded. When looking at all of the accountability measures in place for public schools, the proposal to continue expanding school vouchers while knowingly underfunding public schools throughout Ohio is not in the best interest of this state.

Instead of diverting public funds to private schools, we would love to see the legislature fully fund its public schools for a change. I believe the majority of Ohio voters would appreciate this, too, because such a commitment from our state's elected officials would reduce the frequency and amount of local operating levies that districts must request from their respective communities.

In summary, we oppose voucher expansion and support the fair school funding plan, as well as its use of updated FY2022 inputs, as this would be a step in the right direction toward bringing consistent school funding to our community.

Thank you for your time and consideration.