

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to submit this written testimony in strong opposition to Senate Bill 295. My name is Danielle Firsich, and I am the Director of Public Policy at Planned Parenthood Advocates of Ohio and Planned Parenthood of Greater Ohio.

SB295 attacks our statewide public school system at a time when both additional support and expanded funding are desperately needed. Our current teacher shortage has led to increased attrition rates of public educators in almost every region and district type, putting debilitating pressure on schools that are already struggling with poor public funding and limited resources. In fact, as detailed in a recent Ohio Capital Journal article, "In Ohio, the 'opportunity gap'-- the difference between the two lowest poverty and the two highest-poverty districts — ranked it 39th out of 48 states in equality."<sup>1</sup>

Research shows that "Black students in the U.S. are twice as likely to be in districts 'with funding below estimated adequate levels,' and 3.5 times more likely to be in 'chronically underfunded' districts." Legislation like SB295 will lead to distinct racial disparities in public school performance, and harm students who are already struggling in perpetually underfunded districts. It is difficult to understand how a bill that lays off licensed teachers is expected to address such a situation, especially when little to no insight is being sought from the actual communities living in and around these districts. And it is easy to understand how this bill would explicitly target schools in low-income communities and districts already suffering from massive opportunity gaps.

Studies continue to recommend more targeted funding—particularly state aid—to districts to address and fill these public education gaps. Funding is rarely adequate or equitable, and this is where the true root of the issue lies. Per a recent study released in January by the University of Miami's School of Education & Human Development, Rutgers' Graduate School of Education and the Albert Shanker Institute, "any state aid that is not allocated according to need and local capacity will tend to exacerbate unequal opportunity, while also failing to maximize the adequacy benefits of state revenue."<sup>1</sup> We should be intentionally directing more funding to needy districts, not eliminating their ability to exist whatsoever.

Our state's failing schools call for comprehensive approaches that address root issues like poverty, underfunded mental health resources, and educator shortages, and not glorified punishment for kids who cannot help what zip code they reside in or the financial status of their families. Closing these schools and relocating underserved and underprivileged students does nothing to address the familial, community-based, socioeconomic or structural factors that impact their ability to learn and thrive in their communities.

In September of this year, the Ohio Department of Education released data indicating that "there were more than 50 schools that failed to meet a minimum of three out of five stars," thereby "falling to meet the state's standards."<sup>4</sup> In a state with the sixth-largest public school system in the country, with nearly 90% of Ohio students enrolled in public schools, we should be striving to implement creative and transformative solutions that enhance our school systems and elevate the needs of local communities. Research released last year from Policy Matters Ohio found that "divestments from public schools at the state level 'hurt public school students everywhere – especially those in

rural counties.”<sup>5</sup> Public school funding is a continual, generational investment and statewide imperative that is necessary in providing a comprehensive education in safe, well-resourced schools staffed by highly trained and fairly paid teachers. We cannot continue to siphon public funds from public schools to feed a bloated \$1 billion private school voucher system, and then wonder why our underfunded and poorly performing schools are struggling to survive.

The original draft of this legislation was a mere paragraph long. In recent weeks, it has been expanded to 106 pages, without time for proper analysis from education experts, teachers, students, local communities or public-school officials and districts. Rushing this bill through passage during the final hour of a swift and chaotic lame duck session is both irresponsible and insulting to the students statewide who rely on our public education system.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this rushed and poorly vetted bill. Thank you again for the opportunity to submit this written testimony against SB295.

#### Sources:

<sup>1</sup><https://ohiocapitaljournal.com/2024/02/02/study-ohio-ranks-21st-in-school-funding-fairness-ranks-low-in-equal-opportunity>

<sup>2</sup><https://chroniclet.com/news/413709/bill-looks-to-restructure-close-poor-performing-schools-in-ohio/>

<sup>3</sup><https://myfox28columbus.com/news/local/poorly-performing-public-schools-could-be-targeted-forced-close-due-new-bill-ohio-senate-poor-low-income-areas-education-educate-students-teachers-staff-rankings-ranked-assessments-testing-evaluations-charter-private-school-sb-295-cincinnati>

<sup>4</sup><https://spectrumnews1.com/oh/cleveland/news/2023/09/14/ohio-school-report-cards-released>

<sup>5</sup><https://ohiocapitaljournal.com/2023/10/06/legacy-of-neglect-showcased-in-ohio-schools-report/>