

February 24, 2025

Chair Fowler Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify in writing. My name is Cheryl Kisanuki. I am a pediatrician, recently retired from Nationwide Children's Hospital and an emeritus professor of the College of Medicine at The Ohio State University. I'm here to urge the committee to fully fund the bipartisan Fair School Funding Plan in the state budget.

Ohio's second constitution, adopted in 1851, provides that "The General Assembly shall make such provisions, buy taxation, or otherwise as ... will secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools throughout the state." This was amended in 1870, making the constitutional provisions for free education more specific. This amendment specified that children, wards, and apprentices of actual residents of Ohio were entitled to free admission into the common schools of the State. Three years later the principle of universal education was further emphasized by the passage of a law which declared that the schools of each district should be free to all youths between the ages of six and twenty-one who were children, wards, or apprentices of residents of the State.

In 1991 a complaint is filed by the Ohio Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding in Perry County on behalf of the Northern Local School District challenging the constitutionality of Ohio's elementary and secondary public school funding system. In 1997 The Ohio Supreme Court ordered a "complete, systematic overhaul" of the system with enactment required within 12 months by March 24, 1998. In response to an appeal from the State, The Ohio Supreme court found that local property taxes may be used as part of the funding solution, but they may no longer be used as the primary source of funding for a thorough and efficient system of schools. Instead of adopting a funding remedy, in 1997 the Legislature authorized and funded its first voucher program and permitted unaccountable organizations to operate charter schools. Part of the cost of these new educational options was assigned to local school districts that had no say in the decision. Regulations guaranteeing quality, transparency, access, student rights, or accountability did not apply to the operation of these publicly funded entities. In a serious departure from the Constitutional requirement of separation of church and state, both options allow religious education at public expense. Spending on vouchers has increased dramatically, as the last budget allowed for taxpayer-supported EdChoice vouchers to go to any family in Ohio that wants them, though families with higher incomes get less money. The value of vouchers doesn't change in the current proposed budget: a full voucher for K-8 is \$6,166 and \$8,408 for grades 9-12. Though traditional public schools will get less money in this proposed budget, with more money going to support the voucher systems.

Ohio now operates two systems of education that compete for public funds. One system is public and accountable, one private and unaccountable.

The Fair School Funding Plan (FSFP) was developed over 5 years and implementation began over 20 years after the Ohio school funding system was ruled unconstitutional. FSFP was presented, vetted, dissected, amended and testified to repeatedly in both chambers and endorsed by Governor DeWine. Unfortunately, instead of fully funding the FSFP, more and more money is being siphoned away from public schools in order to support private and unaccountable private school system. This is unconstitutional under the Ohio Constitution – vouchers are not free, common education. Public money is now paying for private school for people who are already sending their kids to private schools. This is a very different policy objective than providing choice for individuals in low-performing public schools, as was upheld by the courts in the case of the Cleveland Scholarship Program.

At a time when society has forgotten how to constructively disagree and resolve conflict, we need young people to learn how to identify and share their own values while recognizing that others might hold different ones. Public schools remain a rare common space that brings together people from different backgrounds, preserving this objective as a public good is central to building tolerance and reducing polarization in society at large. Rather than weaponizing education to deepen political divides, we need to remind ourselves of the real benefits of public schools. In the earliest days of our country's founding, a chief purpose of education was to prepare citizens and ease the dangers of faction development within a divided democracy. This idea of a civic purpose for public schools has ebbed and flowed throughout history and is in urgent need of renewal in this time of rising polarization.¹

The FSFP needs to be fully funded with current cost data. The plan should also be codified and not left to the budget-renewal processes.

I ask you to consider my testimony and choose to support the 90% of Ohio students who attend public schools. Please include full support for the Fair School Funding Plan in the state budget. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

¹ This echoes the “difference without domination” principle explored in Danielle Allen and Rohini Somanathan, *Difference without Domination: Pursuing Justice in Diverse Democracies*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020.