

*Intended to be delivered by Matt Hadsell, Director of Bands, Berkshire Local Schools*

Good afternoon, members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Matt Hadsell, and I am the Director of Bands at Berkshire Local Schools in Geauga County. I'm here not just as an educator, but as someone whose life was transformed by public education.

I grew up in a family and community where poverty and drug abuse were pervasive. But public school saved my life. It gave me opportunities I never would have had otherwise—opportunities that allowed me to break the cycle of poverty, attend college on scholarships and the Pell Grant, and eventually return to empower the next generation in a community I am more than thankful to work for. Public education isn't just a system; it's a lifeline. And right now, that lifeline is fraying at the ends that need it the most.

My superintendent, who works tirelessly for our district, supports the Fair School Funding Plan and I know he can make it work for us. But as far as the mindset of public school funding, in my opinion this doesn't go nearly far enough. Public schools need full and fair funding, not just what's left over after other priorities are met. Legislators need to rise above the priorities of their own biases and special interests and see that schools need to be considered as future insurance, not afterthoughts or easy polling points. Every dollar invested in public education is immeasurably recovered in our economy. Think about it: every person who reads a road sign, signs a contract, or starts a business started with a teacher. Education is the foundation of everything we do, and underfunding it is a disservice to every Ohioan.

But let's be clear: this isn't just about funding public schools. It's about stopping the diversion of taxpayer dollars to private and charter schools that lack accountability and consistently underperform. Studies show that charter school test scores are, on average, worse than public schools with only 17% of charter schools outperforming their public counterparts. That 83% of charters not meeting what they promised their communities. Some headlines have even compared the drop in scores to that of a natural disaster. Why are we funneling public money into systems that fail our students? "School Choice" sounds nice, but in reality, when students face tough challenges, rather than working through them with the support of their school and community, they drop out, take online classes and fall behind both academically and socially. I've seen this happen multiple times just this year. I'll admit the old system wasn't perfect. But it was better than this. At some point we went in the wrong direction.

This isn't a problem that can be solved in five minutes so I must remind the committee I know I'm skimming the surface of an extremely dense topic that requires the input of highly qualified educators. But it more importantly requires lawmakers to see their constituents as neighbors—as a community. If the bible is more your speed, it requires us to treat others the way we want to be treated. Especially your neighbors' children. Communities invest in their schools together. Schools are not businesses; they are a common good. They are the heart of our towns, the engines of opportunity, and the foundation of our future.

Right now, Ohio stands at a crossroads. As climate disasters and economic pressures push people to seek new homes, Ohio has the chance to become a beacon of opportunity. But that starts with well-funded schools. Families don't move to places with underfunded education systems. They move to places where their children can thrive.

This is the most important moment in our lifetime to rally as a state for our children. With the closures of federal agencies, including the department of education, the federal government is once again turning its back on Ohio, just as it did when it encouraged offshore manufacturing that put so many of my loved ones and probably yours in a cycle of poverty, drug abuse, and despair. And if we don't act now, our schools—and our communities—will suffer all over again in ways we're used to and new ways we're not.

So I ask you: Be the leaders who restore Ohio's educational reputation. Be the leaders who invest in our schools, our children, and our future. Because when you invest in public education, you're not just investing in schools—you're investing in Ohioans.

Thank you for taking the time to listen and think on these words.