

INTERESTED PARTY TESTIMONY OF:

Dena Sico

936 Oberlin Dr. Columbus, OH 43221

REGARDING: House Bill 96 (H.B.96)

To express the intent of the General Assembly to fully phase-in the Fair School Funding Plan and update the cost calculations to meet current economic circumstances

House Education Committee

Good afternoon, Chair Fowler, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Education Committee. My name is Dena Sico, I am a proud parent of two Columbus City School students, and the wife of a CCS graduate. **I am here in support of fully funding the Fair School Funding plan and ask that the formula be updated to account for current day costs.**

As our children approached school age, my husband and I watched our neighbors with young children flee from our neighborhood to affluent suburbs. We made an intentional choice to stay within the Columbus City school system. I have to take a moment to acknowledge that my family has the privilege to make that choice. There are many families within our district whose economic circumstances leave them without a choice. I believe that all children deserve equitable financial support for their public education, regardless of where they live or their circumstances. My kids don't deserve any more or less than any other child. We have experienced this inequality firsthand as our former neighbors and friends in more affluent districts enjoy the privilege of smaller class sizes, additional enrichment opportunities, and more accessible support inside and outside the classroom.

I decided to become a parent advocate several years ago because I believe that public education in this state can thrive; it will take investment and commitment from you. I was engaged in the budget cycle process 4 years ago when the Fair School Funding formula was initially passed, and again 2 years ago when we advocated to continue phasing those funds in. I was also one parent among many who stood alongside teachers during the Columbus City Schools negotiation with the Columbus Education Association at the start of the 2022-2023 school year. Parents were there to support educators because we know our schools are incredibly under-resourced and our teachers are underpaid. While we were pushing the School Board to negotiate in good faith and spend our limited dollars more effectively, we knew at the core of the problem was the limited access to resources for the district itself. It simply isn't enough.

What does it say about our community that the school year was disrupted by something as basic as air conditioning in classrooms? The Fair School Funding formula was meant to address that inequality, and the state's decades-long unconstitutional public school funding formula. But based on the governor's proposed formula this year, Columbus City Schools would lose \$45 million over the next two school years, in a time when funds are needed more than ever.

I also supported efforts to pass the school levy with the expectation that the district could use those funds to maintain and/or expand capital improvements, like upgrading HVAC systems, adapting old and new buildings to be resilient to a changing climate, as well as support for general operating needs for key personnel like counselors, social workers, and substitute teachers. CCS relies on 70% of its revenue by property taxes as the state has forced CCS to ask the community for funding. The investments of Columbus taxpayers should support what we were promised, and not continue to fill in the gap of our State.

In fact, under the current proposal, our state share of education dollars would be cut in half by the end of 2027. Specific to Columbus, our State only funds about 25% of expenses, and we are the largest school district in the state. And that figure is even more staggering when you consider other states cover a range closer to 75%-95%.

Similarly, in the last budget cycle, lawmakers finalized a 2-year operating budget that left Ohio's public schools underfunded by comparison to its charter school competitors by putting increased dollars into private school vouchers. Even though about 90% of Ohio's children are in public schools (and rural parts of the state lack many private school options), our leaders chose to disinvest in our communities.

The assembly has a constitutional mandate to ensure public education is properly funded and our children have equal access to the same quality education as their peers throughout our state. If we do not fund fairly all school districts in Ohio, our children in economically disadvantaged areas, both urban and rural, will remain vulnerable to teacher shortages, overwhelming classroom sizes, crumbling infrastructure, chaotic bussing, and an embarrassing lack of basic resources. All of these factors diminish their abilities to succeed academically and beyond.

Our state needs the leaders in this assembly to be education champions who will not relent until all children have what they need to learn and to thrive. Please make the most of this opportunity to be the superheros our children can look up to, by updating the formula with current day costs. Thank you.