

Interested Party Testimony – HB 96

House Education Committee

March 4, 2025

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

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Karen Leith, PhD. I am the League of Women Voters state advocacy chair. Additionally, I have been an educator my whole life with classroom experience on every level. My children went through Ohio public schools for 8 years, and my grandchildren have been raised in the Kent public schools. Currently, my daughter has spent the last 24 years across two local school districts as teacher, reading specialist and math coach. (She keeps me up on classroom stories and local issues.) I am here to offer thoughts from my experience and from LWVO positions on school funding. Our positions are the result of extensive study and update. They are originally accepted and then affirmed every two years at our State Convention.

**Where We Stand:**

**1. LWVO supports adequate and equitable funding of Ohio's public schools.**

We have 1.9 million children in our public schools. That is 90% of the Ohio student age population. An investment in strong public education is an investment in the future of Ohio. It is a strengthening of our democracy. It is a visioning of a strong economic future for every area of our state.

Strong public schools teach not only subject matter, but help students discover their own ability to learn and grow. As an educator, I quickly learned that as I began in Chicago's poorest schools. There is nothing like seeing students blossom as they feed their own curiosity. As I have done special programs in schools and watched my own grandchildren, I know we cannot deny that chance to every child in Ohio.

**2. LWVO calls on the Ohio Legislature to achieve adequate and equitable funding of Ohio's public schools in HB 96, the budget bill for FY 26 and FY 27. No more delays.**

This is our chance at finally reaching a constitutional solution to school funding asked by the DeRolph case in the 4 decisions between 1997 and 2002. The Fair School Funding Plan was and is a bipartisan effort. This is a plan built with the voices of those who know our schools – the superintendents and treasurers across this state. This is a plan that considers the many different factors that make each district unique.

**3. For the Fair School Funding plan to achieve its goals, lawmakers must use up-to-data input costs and accurate measures of local capacity, and make the financial investment that makes the plan whole.**

We all know from our personal lives that costs are not stagnate. We have had inflation across the board. Families are struggling – and so are our schools. It is important that we use the 2024 costs.

**Table 1: Comparison of Proposed FY26-27 Funding Changes for Traditional K-12, Districts, JVSDs, Community Schools and Ohio's 5 School Voucher Programs**

	<b><u>FY25 to FY26 Change</u></b>	<b><u>FY26 to FY27 Change</u></b>	<b><u>Biennial Change FY25- FY27 Total<sup>1</sup></u></b>
Traditional Districts Foundation Formula	Reduction of \$31.6 million (-0.4%)	An additional reduction of - \$40.2 million (-0.5%)	\$103.4 million decrease from FY25 levels
Vouchers	Increase of \$88.6 million (8.2%)	An additional increase of \$88.2 million (7.6%)	\$265.4 million increase from FY25 levels
Community and STEM Schools	Increase of \$73.6 million (5.8%)	An additional increase of \$74.5 million (5.5%)	\$221.8 million increase from FY25 levels
JVSDs	Increase of \$43.6 million (8.8%)	An additional increase of \$29.1 million (5.4%)	\$116.3 million increase from FY25 levels
Traditional Districts "Add-ons" <sup>2</sup>	Increase of \$45.3 million (15.9%)	An additional increase of \$13.6 million (4.1%)	\$104.3 million increase from FY25 levels

**OEPI INITIAL ANALYSIS OF EXECUTIVE BUDGET K-12 FUNDING PROPOSAL**

- The above decreases in funding are NOT due to changes in school district enrollment as the LSC simulations hold enrollment constant in FY26 and FY27 at FY25 levels.
- 68 districts (11%) gained enrollment between FY24 and FY25 but experience a net reduction in foundation formula funding compared to FY25.
- 61 (17.5%) of the 349 districts experiencing a net reduction in foundation funding in the FY26-27 biennium grew enrollment between FY24 and FY25.

It is also imperative that we take into account all the special populations in our schools: the English language learners, students with special needs, and those living in extreme poverty. Ohio public schools must accept every child. But, for example, private schools in Ohio are not required to provide IEPs or special education services to students with disabilities. However, private schools that receive federal funding are required to make their programs accessible to students with disabilities.

I personally know how well students can do when the resources are there. Several years ago, I tutored the daughter of a private school head master. As a student in the public school nearby, she was able to get more help. She was a visual learner, and my task was to give algebra concepts and operation a visual representation. She is now a successful adult with an MFA.

And my granddaughter was officially diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and issued an IEP. As she went through the Kent City schools, she learned to be her own advocate through middle and high school. She graduated cum laude and is now at Savannah College of Art and Design.

It is imperative to understand that the reason for the continued decline in the state share is that the property value and income data used to compute the state and local share is updated in both FY26 and FY27, **while the education input data used to update the base cost figure in each school district is not updated in either year.**

When we properly fund our schools and meet the needs of all our students, we not only contribute to their success, but the success of our state.

**4. LWVO calls on Ohio lawmakers to make public education their priority. This includes adopting tax policies that will provide adequate revenue and limiting spending that diverts funds from the public education system.**

Shared fiscal responsibility is in our Constitution. The current statewide average state share percentage in FY25 is 38.4%. The LSC simulations show that in FY26, the statewide average state percentage **decreases to 35.0%**. The LSC simulations also show that in FY27, the statewide average state percentage **decreases again to 32.2%**. **At the time the DeRolph case was filed in 1991, it was 46%.**

**But this budget proposes increases in the voucher programs.** I will refer you to my colleague, Susan Kaeser's written testimony that has tables and maps of where the schools are. Susan is our Education Issue Specialist and did quite a bit of research on the DEW site. There is even more on the LWVO website: [www.lwvohio.org](http://www.lwvohio.org)

Added to this decline in state share, this General assembly has introduced a number of bills that would reduce state revenues (the flat tax) and limit the ability of local entities to collect what is needed in local tax shares, even eliminating the authority to levy replacement property tax levies.

Please, Ohio's children need you to truly invest in them now. This needs to be your priority.