

# WITNESS INFORMATION FORM

Please complete the Witness Information Form before testifying:

Date: Mar. 4, 2025

Name: Neal Whitman

Are you representing: Yourself ☐ Organization ☒

Organization (If Applicable): Reynoldsburg City Schools Board of Education

Position/Title: board member, legislative liaison

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Do you wish to be added to the committee notice email distribution list? Yes ☒ No ☐

## Business before the committee

Legislation (Bill/Resolution Number): HB 96

Specific Issue: Fair School Funding Plan

Are you testifying as a: Proponent ☐ Opponent ☐ Interested Party ☒

Are you testifying: In-Person ☐ Written-Only ☒

Will you have a written statement, visual aids, or other material to distribute? Yes ☐ No ☐

(If yes, please send an electronic version of the documents, if possible, to the Chair's office prior to committee. You may also submit hard copies to the Chair's staff prior to committee.)

How much time will your testimony require? \_\_\_\_\_

Please provide a brief statement on your position:

Preserve and fully fund phase 3 of the Fair School Funding Plan.

*Please be advised that this form and any materials (written or otherwise) submitted or presented to this committee are records that may be requested by the public and may be published online.*

## House Education Committee

### Testimony regarding HB 96

March 4, 2025

Dr. Neal Whitman

#### Reynoldsburg City Schools Board of Education

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

Thank you for accepting my testimony. As legislative liaison for the Reynoldsburg City Schools Board of Education, I encourage the Committee to preserve the Fair School Funding Plan, as it was intended, in the budget for the next biennium.

Although the budget includes the final 2 years of the Plan's phase-in, it does so in a way that negates the careful thought that created the Plan.

The idea of the Plan is sensible: As local communities are able to pay more of the costs for their local schools, the state pays less. But for this to work, you need the most current numbers for two things: How much it costs a community to provide an education for its students (the base cost), and how much of that cost the community should be able to provide (the local share).

Many communities, including Reynoldsburg, have seen significant increases in their property tax values and incomes, which have been taken into account in calculating communities' local share for phase 3. For that reason, the amount set aside during the next biennium for Ohio's traditional public schools decreases, from \$7.9B in FY2025 to \$7.8B in FY2027.

However, many communities, including Reynoldsburg, have **also** seen significant increases in the base cost, mainly in the cost of salaries and benefits to stay competitive. These increases have **not** been taken into account for phase 3. In fact, they weren't fully taken into account even in the last biennial budget, which used data from FY2022.

So we have state and local shares based on lowball calculations of most communities' base costs. When the combined state and local funding comes up short in FY2026 and FY2027, it will fall to local taxpayers to make up the difference.

It gets worse. Even if the base cost **were** current, the local share based on it is the amount that the local community is **supposed** to be able to shoulder. But often, it's not the amount they **actually** shoulder. As property values rise, school district tax revenues for the most part do not, because of HB 920, a tax relief law passed in 1976 that prevents most voter-passed school district levies from keeping up with inflation. So if a school district wants a community to pay for its state-calculated local share, they must ask for it, in the form of a levy. Those haven't done so well, especially recently. Following a failed levy in November, we are now making \$8M in cuts, while trying to determine when to try again.

It may be that the reluctance to update the base costs is precisely because it would call for an increased state share of public school funding. I have a suggestion for making it easier to accommodate the updated costs. In contrast to the \$100M reduction in state funding of public schools, the budget proposes an increase of \$265M for vouchers. Between FY2025 and FY2026, this amounts to an 8.2% increase from the \$1.1B in vouchers awarded this fiscal year. Most of this increase, and the increase that brought voucher funding to its current level, is a result of the near-universal expansion of EdChoice vouchers in FY2024. Given that EdChoice vouchers are bound to be found unconstitutional, the legislature could save itself some later inconvenience by slashing the voucher allocation, and putting that money toward Ohio's public schools.

I've been asked: What about the families using these vouchers? Isn't the State obliged to provide for the education of every child? In response, I offer the following analogy: When I was a kid, sometimes Mom made tuna casserole for supper. Did I have to eat it? No; if I didn't like tuna casserole, I was welcome to get myself some leftovers out of the fridge. But Mom wasn't going to make separate meals for me, my brother, and my sister. That would have been wasteful.

It's wasteful—and unconstitutional—for the State of Ohio to fund multiple school systems. Every student is welcome in our state's public schools. Families not wishing to send their children to public schools have the right to pay out of pocket to send them to private schools or homeschool them. That's how it needs to be if we intend to fund a thorough and efficient public education system for all the kids of Ohio.

Thank you for your time and consideration.