

WITNESS INFORMATION FORM

Please complete the Witness Information Form before testifying:

Date: 3/3/2025

Name: Phillip J. Oko

Are you representing: Yourself ☐ Organization ☒

Organization (If Applicable): Garfield Heights City School District

Position/Title: Treasurer/CEO

Address: 5640 Briarcliff Drive

City: Garfield Heights State: Ohio Zip: 44125

Best Contact Telephone: 216-475-8100 Email: poko@ghbulldogs.org

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

Business before the committee

Legislation (Bill/Resolution Number): HB96

Specific Issue: Fair School Funding Plan - Updated Base Costs Inputs

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

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? None, Written Testimony

Please provide a brief statement on your position: See Below:

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.



Dr. Richard D. Reynolds
Superintendent of Schools

Phillip J. Oko, M.B.A.
Treasurer/CFO

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House Education Committee
House Bill 96
March 4, 2025

Chair Fowler Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on House Bill (HB) 96, the biennial budget.

My name is Phillip J. Oko and I serve as the proud Treasurer/CFO for the Garfield Heights City School District in Cuyahoga County. Garfield Heights CSD is a 7-square mile urban first-ring District that sits just below Cleveland. We serve roughly 2,700 students across 5 buildings. Our student population is a majority-minority, with 85% of our students being African-American.

As Treasurer of Garfield Heights CSD, I see firsthand how our schools shape not just individual student futures, but the vitality of our entire community. Our District, Board, City and Community actively work to ensure we utilize our resources to the absolute best of our ability. Our work at Garfield Heights CSD, alongside our Mayor Matt Burke, City Council, and the Garfield Heights Community, is a testament to the complex understanding of the factors it takes to educate a whole Garfield Heights student. The Fair School Funding Plan is an embodiment of that work for our District.

The Fair School Funding Plan provides an objective, rational, and transparent solution to school funding. Created in collaboration with school district leaders and expert practitioners, it translates real student needs into concrete resources. These real costs allow our District leadership to create fiscal and academic plans to reflect our Strategic Plan, and to create programming to reflect on the needs of our students and community.

I am here today to ask on behalf of my students, my district, and the community I serve to request that the House continues the phase-in of the formula with updated base cost inputs. This will provide the stability and predictability our schools need to create accurate five-year forecasts and implement sustainable educational programming, and will account for the inflation we are all experiencing.

Our Story & Impact - Garfield Heights is a proud school district and community, but it goes without saying that there are serious funding challenges specific to our District. Albeit being one of the highest taxed Districts in the state – due to unique city charters and county levies, our School District is amongst the poorest when it comes to income, local share, and tax distribution, and overall ranking. Garfield Heights has seen an extraordinary economic change over the past 25 years, mainly attributed to the Great Recession, for which we have never recovered. Although our financial status is often below that of our peers, we pride ourselves on being excellent stewards of the limited funds we have. For example, we have not asked for new operating money via property taxes in 13 years (last new money levy was 2012). Unfortunately, our District received a 55% property valuation increase, and our residents have felt the immediate pain of that, as a large portion of our District lives on fixed income. As a result of this economic pressure, our renewal emergency levies have been rejected in decisive manners. Omitting cost input updates would



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further shift the burden onto our local taxpayers, and lead to a loss in state funding over the life of the phase-in, and an overreliance on further property taxes. Along with that, we managed our large COVID-ESSER fund allocation, roughly \$25 million over 3 years, without putting our District at risk of a fiscal cliff. We are adept at stretching every dollar we have, and have continually operated with a cash balance of 20%-30% of our total expenditures, to account for the cyclical nature of our funding cycle. Without cost input updates, predicting funding trends long-term will be difficult and unsustainable.

Special Education – The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (DEW) led a study to examine the true costs of special education and recommend weights that would allow for a more accurate partnership between the state and schools. Implementation of these weights is important to our district because we are a highly transient District, with increasing special education costs. Year-in and year-out we have new students that require intensive services via IEPs, that are inherited from other Districts. We are asking for updated weight calculation to be able to better service those students, as the increasing cost and needs of our student base with disabilities are ever-changing and growing.

DPIA weights – DEW also led a study to determine the cost of educating student who are economically disadvantaged. Over half of Ohio students are considered economically disadvantaged. Garfield Heights is a universal Title-1 and CEP District – meaning all of our students are considered economically disadvantaged. We utilize these funds for critical programming needs, such as wraparound services, mental health needs, and intensive intervention to address learning loss. Our students need these additional supports and services. The long-lasting effects of COVID and learning loss has presented challenges to not only educate, but to close the gap of the learning loss. We receive roughly \$2 million in DPIA funding, and updated costs will help keep pace with the rising expenditure costs. This is a crucial part of our funding story. DPIA weights with cost inputs are critical to our service to our children and community, and will have a long-standing effect on our students.

Predictability - We need the formula fully implemented with base cost updates to ensure sustainability throughout the state. When the future of funding is unpredictable, we are not able to plan for student needs and implement the programming necessary in our communities and schools. A fully funded formula with updated cost inputs greatly enhances our ability to service our students and communities for the unique and complex needs that are required to educate the whole student.

In closing, the Fair School Funding Plan represents more than just a funding formula - it represents our commitment to every Ohio student, family, and community. By fully implementing this plan, we invest in stronger communities, a more competitive workforce, and a brighter future for Ohio. Thank you for your consideration of these crucial next steps in supporting Ohio's educational excellence.

Chair Fowler Arthur and members of the committee, thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,


Phillip J. Oko