

**House Finance Committee  
House Bill 96 Testimony****Licking Heights Schools  
Mrs. Tracy Russ, Board President  
Dr. Kevin S. Miller, Superintendent  
Mr. Todd Griffith, Treasurer****March 12, 2025****Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the  
House Finance Committee,**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on House Bill 96. My name is Tracy Russ, and I have had the privilege of serving on the Licking Heights School District's Board of Education for 12 years. I currently serve as the Board President. Joining me today are Superintendent Dr. Kevin Miller and CFO Mr. Todd Griffith.

We are here today to ask the Ohio Legislature to approve phase-in of years five and six of the Fair School Funding Plan, currently included in House Bill 96, along with updating inputs to the base costs of the Plan to Fiscal Year '24. Full implementation of the formula is about meeting the needs of *each child* we educate. The formula is also about our communities, because when our schools thrive, our communities thrive, and Ohio thrives.

Situated in both Franklin and Licking Counties, Licking Heights is among the fastest growing school districts in the state. At 5,400 students, we have tripled our enrollment since 2003. In the past five years alone, our enrollment has increased by over 1,200 students. As our district is growing quickly, it is becoming more diverse in many ways:

- Almost 20% of our students are English Language Learners, with 52 different home languages spoken in our school district.
- Over 56% of our students are economically disadvantaged.
- Over 15% of our students are students with disabilities.

In the ten years before the Fair School Funding Plan, Licking Heights lost nearly **\$100 million in state funding** due to funding caps, severely limiting our ability to serve our students. Even in the initial phase-in of the Fair School Funding Plan, which was a positive step for the district, Licking Heights still realized \$11 million in lost state funding. Obviously, this loss of state funding negatively impacts programming for our students and our long-term financial strategy.

**Despite these challenges, the Fair School Funding Plan is working.** It has allowed us to make critical improvements.

Mrs. Campbell is one of 20 English Language Learner teachers in the district. Previously, she was serving more than 75 students each day who are not only learning math, science, social studies, and reading—they are also learning how to speak English. This ratio was typical of all of the EL teachers in our district, with rates that reached as high as 95 to 1 at times. The Fair School Funding Plan has provided funding to hire more EL teachers. Now, Mrs. Campbell serves 61 students a day. It is progress, but it is still too many students for one teacher to serve effectively. Further phase-in of the plan will allow us to continue reducing those ratios so that our EL students have the very best chances for success.

Mrs. Stirn is a kindergarten teacher who has served our district for 19 years. Previous to the initial phase-in of the Fair School Funding Plan, she had 29 five-year-olds in her kindergarten class. Mrs. Majerus had 31 students in her kindergarten class. These were typical kindergarten classroom sizes. We have used the funding from the Fair School Funding Plan to focus on reducing class sizes in the primary grades to meet the individual needs of a diverse student population. Our kindergarten ratios are now closer to 1 teacher for every 23 students.

The Fair School Funding Plan is making a difference for Licking Heights' students, and we are thankful for legislators' support of it in the last two budget bills. As a result, **Licking Heights earned a four-and-a-half-star rating on the latest District Report Card—the highest in our district's history. In addition, Licking Heights had the second-highest rate of academic growth among Ohio's 609 school districts.**

The Fair School Funding Plan has been hugely impactful for Licking Heights. The proof is in our outcomes.

Today, on behalf of my students, my district, and the community I serve, I ask that the House continue the phase-in of the formula with updated base cost inputs. Without the updated base costs, Ohio is taking a big step backwards in funding its public schools. Licking Heights has the **highest property tax rates in Licking County**, largely driven by construction costs necessary to keep pace with enrollment growth. Not updating the base cost inputs will upset the balance of the state and local share and increase the financial burden on our district's taxpayers. Using FY '24 data will help us offset inflationary factors in our economy and preserve the financial partnership between the state and our district.

We ask for your continued support in fully implementing the Fair School Funding Plan and adjusting base cost inputs. The success of our students and community depends on it.

**Thank you for your time and consideration. We are happy to answer any questions.**