

**House Finance Committee
HB 96 Testimony**

**Southwest Licking Local Schools
Mrs. Kandee Engle, Board Member
Dr. Kasey Perkins, Superintendent
Mr. Richard Jones, Treasurer**

March 10, 2025

Chairman Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on House Bill (HB) 96.

My name is Kandee Engle, and I have had the pleasure of serving as a board member for the Southwest Licking Local Schools Board of Education for 10 years. Joining me today are our district Superintendent, Dr. Kasey Perkins, and CFO, Mr. Richard Jones.

We strongly urge the House Finance Committee to carefully reconsider the Governor's recent school funding proposal. While we appreciate the inclusion of the Fair School Funding Formula in the Governor's budget, it is vital that the inputs be updated to reflect the most current fiscal year data. Our district's continued growth must be taken into account in this proposal.

District Growth

Southwest Licking Local Schools, located on the western side of Licking County, is among the fastest-growing districts in Ohio. We currently have 24 developments in various stages of completion and over 11,000 acres of developable land. Our enrollment exceeds projections by 866 students, with over 5,100 students currently

enrolled and an anticipated increase of 652 students within the next decade. Our district is becoming increasingly diverse:

- Nearly 6% of our students are English Language Learners, representing 31 home languages.
- Over 42% of our students are economically disadvantaged.
- 18% are students with disabilities.
- 17% are identified as gifted.

The Governor's budget proposal ranks our district as the second-highest funding reduction in the state, with a \$5 million cut over two years. Such a reduction would severely impact student programs and long-term financial planning. Without full implementation of the Fair School Funding Plan, we will be forced to significantly limit student opportunities.

In 2017, our community approved a \$78 million bond—after multiple attempts at the ballot—to accommodate growth, allowing us to build a new high school and intermediate school. Both buildings are now at capacity after less than five years. Additionally, we allocated \$30 million to construct an 800-student elementary school rather than renovate an outdated 450-student facility. Despite proactive planning, inaccurate OFCC enrollment projections have hindered our ability to prepare adequately. We are now back on the ballot seeking approval for another bond to expand our high school and build a new school. Due to proposed state funding cuts, we cannot ask our taxpayers to also cover operational costs.

District Programming

Our district offers robust programming which introduces students to diverse college and career pathways through middle and high school, providing access to

engineering and design, environmental sustainability, digital art, computer science, skilled trades, agriculture, entrepreneurship, and more. These opportunities provide students with hands-on learning experiences, equipping them with industry-relevant skills that set them up for success in post-secondary education and the workforce. Cutting funding would mean fewer course offerings, larger class sizes, and diminished opportunities for career exploration at an early stage, putting our students at a disadvantage compared to their peers in better funded districts.

One of our most impactful programs is our peer collaboration initiative, which allows general education students to work closely with students with disabilities across all grade levels. The program fosters a culture of inclusion, empathy and mutual learning while equipping students with essential soft skills such as communication, leadership, and teamwork—qualities that are critical in today’s workforce. Additionally, participation in this program helps students qualify for the Ohio Means Jobs Readiness Seal, increasing their employability. However, without adequate state funding, we risk losing the resources necessary to sustain this initiative, ultimately depriving students of an opportunity that not only enhances their education but also enriches their character and future prospects.

Southwest Licking Local Schools also serve as a vital hub for our community. On any given evening or weekend, our buildings host a wide range of activities, including Special Olympic athletics, Safety Town for our youngest learners, local dance studios, scouting groups, religious organizations, voter education events, and even driver’s education courses. This community engagement strengthens the bond between our schools and residents, reinforcing the idea that our facilities are not just for students but for everyone. However, these community partnerships depend on our ability to keep our buildings staffed, maintained, and accessible outside

school hours. If state funding is reduced, our ability to offer these services will be compromised, leaving a gap in resources for families and organizations that rely on our schools as a gathering place.

The Fair School Funding Plan, with updated cost inputs reflecting 2024 figures, is the best solution to ensure districts receive adequate funding based on actual educational costs. Without this adjustment, the financial burden will shift disproportionately to local taxpayers.

As one of Ohio's fastest-growing districts, we urge you to reconsider the proposed budget to ensure funding reflects current and future student populations. While we appreciate the Governor's continued commitment to education, the significant reduction in funding jeopardizes our ability to support students effectively. A funding model that fails to account for rapid growth will leave thousands of students underserved.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in regard to HB96. We welcome your questions and feedback.