



Interested Party Testimony – HB 96
House Finance Committee
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Chairman Stewart, Vice Chairman Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, my name is Susie Kaeser. I appreciate the opportunity to share on behalf of the LWVO, my thoughts about public school funding.

I live in Cleveland Heights. This first ring suburb of Cleveland was incorporated as a village in 1902 and one of the first actions taken by the 1,500 residents was to fund the construction of a public school – a reflection of our country's historic appreciation of the value of education to individuals, to democratic self-rule, to a healthy community, and to the economy of a developed country. There is still a school on that site and I have been a classroom volunteer there for the last 37 years.

The settlers in my community did what settlers in every Ohio community did. They invested in public education. No matter where you go in Ohio, the public schools likely have the deepest roots of any local institution, and have touched the lives of almost all of the residents. They have been a source of pride, the center of community life and community connections, an economic driver, the source of community leaders, voters and contributors to the economy. They reflect the best in who we are as Americans. They are a project of the whole community. We invest in them together because all of us benefit when our children are allowed to flourish.

Public schools recognize the separation of church and state and are funded by the public because they serve the common good. They are stable, transparent, accountable, professional, and operate under strict standards to protect taxpayers and students. They welcome everyone. These qualities are unique to public schools.

It should be no surprise that public schools are the primary education provider in every corner of the state. When you add up enrollment in public schools, charter schools and private schools in each Ohio county it turns out that between 95% and 100% of the students in 47 counties attend a public school and in 37 counties that share is between 90% and 94%. They are still the primary education source in the remaining 13 counties where they account for between 73% and 89% of the students.

I am proud of our public schools and I'm grateful to our educators, their earnest effort to serve every one of the unique children who comes through the door, and their respect for children of all abilities, incomes, racial and ethnic background, primary language, personality, and degrees of motivation and family support. Public schools add value to my community an interesting and wonderful place to live.

I've participated in at least 30 levy campaigns since I bought my house in 1981. Our taxpayers have been generous with our schools. But we need relief too. The partnership between local taxpayers and state lawmakers is out of balance and could easily collapse without the state contributing more toward the success of this important enterprise that serves all of us.

Ohio families have multiple legal options for educating their children which is appropriate in a pluralistic society. Those options accommodate the individual preferences and religious priorities of a diverse population. In addition to nonsectarian public schools, charter schools are available in 39 counties, and private schools are found in 77 counties. Families can also homeschool their children and join together to create nonchartered nonpublic schools. The ODEW website lists 367 of them in 61 counties.

Until recently public funds were reserved for public schools, and families accepted responsibility for funding their personal preferences outside the option available to them at public expense. Over the last two decades lawmakers have used the budget to shift that responsibility to the public but have not fulfilled their historic commitment and legal obligation to adequately fund the public system that we all own. We have two different kinds of publicly funded education providers. It's problematic and puts at risk a strong public system.

The bulk of state funds for charter schools and private schools flows to the 6 urban counties where between 73% and 79% of students attend a public school. Schools located in Lucas, Montgomery, Summit, Hamilton, Franklin and Cuyahoga county educate 39% of the public school students in the state, 67% of the private school students, and 81% of the charter school students. Public schools in these counties pay the price with lost revenue.

Taxpayers in 75 counties, most of the state, are funding nonpublic alternatives that are not available to most of them, and are also carrying too much of the funding burden for the schools they rely on.

It's time for education funding to actually be fair.

It's hard to understand how spending more than \$400 million on charter schools and private schools can be justified when cutting more than \$100 million in state basic aid for public schools. The needs of fewer than 300,000 students are more important than the education of 1.5 million public schools children?

A fair system makes adequately funding the public education system the priority in shaping K-12 spending and tax policies in the state budget for the next biennium. That includes:

- using accurate and current cost data to establish the base cost.
- no more delays in appropriating funds adequate for full funding of the formula and categoricals.
- state tax policies that guarantee adequate funds to meet the total cost of the final two-year phase in of the fair school funding plan formula.
- constraining unlimited growth in private option spending. The current generosity with tuition levels for charters and vouchers is neither justifiable nor reasonable. It undermines progress in public school funding.

As part of becoming a state Ohio established a system of common schools as the most reliable way to guarantee all children access to a free education, a necessity for self-governance. The most effective way to strengthen education in all 88 Ohio counties is to invest in the public schools that welcome all children, are located in every community, serve the public, and create our future.

Please make them your priority.