

WITNESS INFORMATION FORM

Please complete the Witness Information Form before testifying:

Date: 6/16/2025

Name: Phillip J. Oko

Are you representing: Yourself ☐ Organization ☒

Organization (If Applicable): Garfield Heights CSD

Position/Title: Treasurer/Chief Financial Officer

Address: 5640 Briarcliff Drive

City: Garfield Heights State: OH 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): 335

Specific Issue: Inside Millage elimination, Cash carry-over, CBC and loss of local BOE control.

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? Written only

Please provide a brief statement on your position: Garfield Heights CSD is opposed to the sweeping property tax changes as it contends with a significant loss of funding and local control.

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 Ways and Means Committee
House Bill 335
June 18, 2025**

Chair Roemer, Vice Chair Thomas, Ranking Member Troy, and Members of the Ways and Means Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on House Bill 335. I am Phillip Oko, the proud Treasurer/CFO of Garfield Heights City School District in Cuyahoga County.

Dr. Richard D. Reynolds
Superintendent of Schools

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

Board of Education

Millette King, M. Ed., L.S.W.
President

Heather Morrison
Vice President

Thandeka Cox, M. Ed.

Nichelle N. Daniels

Ashley M. Thomas, M. Ed.

On behalf of the Garfield Heights City School District, I submit this written testimony in strong opposition to House Bill 335, also known as the "Property Tax Relief NOW Act."

HB 335 is not tax relief. It is a direct and deliberate dismantling of public education in Ohio's poorest communities. This legislation would permanently remove critical funding, impose punitive financial controls, and destabilize school districts across the state—especially those like Garfield Heights CSD, or those similar to ours.

Garfield Heights: Our District and Impact

Garfield Heights CSD is a 7-square mile urban first-ring District that sits just below Cleveland. We serve roughly 2,600 students across 5 buildings. Our student population is a majority-minority, with 85% of our students being African-American. Our district has not passed a new-money operating levy since 2012—a testament to the financial pressures our community faces.

Despite these constraints, we have managed to maintain essential services through careful planning and fiscal discipline. That balance will collapse under HB 335. Under current language, we stand to lose approximately \$2.6 million annually in inside millage, which equates to roughly 5.6% of our general fund operating revenue.

This loss would immediately trigger massive structural changes to the way we do business, including but not limited to:

- Larger class sizes and fewer specialized courses
- Elimination of intervention, mental health, and academic supports
- Reduced support services, including counselors, librarians, and specialists
- Deferred maintenance on buildings and facilities
- Outdated textbooks and technology, as routine upgrades are postponed

Community Consequences: Far Beyond the Classroom

The consequences of HB 335 extend to the entire Garfield Heights community:

- Declining property values, as school quality diminishes



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- Difficulty attracting and retaining families and businesses
- More frequent and divisive levy elections, with lower odds of success
- Long-term economic decline, as educated workers and employers relocate elsewhere

Cash Balance Cap and Structural Instability

HB 335's 30% cap on cash reserves and authority for county budget commissions to override voter-approved levies would:

- Remove essential financial tools for dealing with emergencies or economic downturns
- Block our ability to plan, especially due to the misalignment between fiscal years (July–June) and tax collection timelines (January–December)
- Give county budget commissions authority to override voter-approved levies, further eroding Local Board of Education control

Conclusion

Garfield Heights City Schools has operated without new operating dollars for over a decade, while serving one of the most economically disadvantaged student populations in the state.

HB 335 undermines all of that. It will eliminate \$2.6 million in annual funding, destabilize our workforce, hollow out our academic offerings, and strip away the very supports our students rely on to succeed.

We respectfully urge you to reject House Bill 335 and protect Ohio's commitment to equitable, stable, and locally accountable public education.

Respectfully submitted,

Phillip J. Oko

Treasurer/Chief Financial Officer
Garfield Heights City School District