Senate Education Committee
House Bill 96
May 4, 2025

I appreciate the chance to testify today regarding House Bill 96. My name is Grace Whistle, and I am a parent and PTA member of Mark Twain Elementary School in the Westerville City School district. My husband is Matthew Whistle and he is a teacher at Westerville North High School. We have three children in third grade and under. We are highly invested in our schools and what is happening with current legislation around funding the education of our community. Our district serves about 14,600 students in Central Ohio. While most of our buildings are located in the suburbs, our schools are made up of students from many different racial and ethnic groups, varied socioeconomic backgrounds and with differing abilities and needs.

Thank you for your work in supporting Ohio's public schools. I present to you the following comments and concerns regarding House Bill 96.

Fair School Funding Plan: Preserve the Phase-In and Update Base Cost Inputs
I believe that the Fair School Funding Plan (FSFP) is a fair model that reflects the true cost of educating students. Temporary "bridge funding" would destabilize our system. We urge you to maintain the phase-in (as proposed by Governor DeWine), update the base costs to reflect the current costs of educating students and maintain guarantees until full implementation of the FSFP is complete, including updated categorical funding. Without these provisions, we would have more of the funding burden shifted onto our community and would be unlikely to pass levies to continue to cover these costs.

Cash Balance Cap & Five-Year Forecast Elimination
In Westerville City Schools, our cash reserves are built and maintained for specific purposes and with long-term intentionality. If cash balances were capped and a five year forecast were replaced with a three year projection, it would reduce our district's ability for responsible financial planning and increase our longer term costs.

We urge the Senate to:
•   Remove the 30% cash balance provision from HB 96; and
•   Reinstate the five-year forecast requirement to ensure long-term financial transparency.

Our district works hard with the funding we have to serve each student well and earn state recognition for our schools. In our district, 43% of students are economically disadvantaged and 1,647 of our pupils are English language learners. Teachers and staff continually go above and beyond, including my own spouse who teaches two high school science classes for English language learners. However, Matthew cannot serve his students well if class sizes swell and staff decrease due to funding changes. Matthew also has specialized training to teach two different engineering classes to equip high achieving students in filling workforce needs. When the district has to stretch teachers to cover "basic" classes only, the trickle down effect is that

these engineering classes may be offered less frequently. These are not the opportunities that we want to take away from our young people.

After our community did not pass a fall levy, we just learned that we will likely lose two teaching positions at our children's elementary school, Mark Twain. These are teachers in the grades our kids are entering (1st and 4th), at such a critical time for learning and growth. Our son who turned 9 yesterday is "twice exceptional" (academically gifted and also has a diagnosis that requires some accommodations). He has thrived in more reasonable class sizes, but the proposed cuts will result in classrooms that are too full for teachers to differentiate learning to meet the needs of our youngest and brightest students. Our family believes in the public school model, but we are concerned about what is to come if we do not have fair and predictable funding to continue equipping our own children and our next generation of leaders.

Chair Brenner and members of the committee, thank you for your time and attention. Please consider the impact of your decisions on our family, Westerville City Schools and so many similar communities.