



May 12, 2025
Senate Education Committee
Interested Party Testimony on HB 96
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Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on HB 96, Ohio's next biennial budget. The Ohio Federation of Teachers represents teachers and school support staff in traditional public schools and charter schools, higher education faculty and staff, librarians and library workers, and social work professionals.

Ohio's Public Schools Need a Fair Funding Formula

Ohio's public school districts need a predictable funding formula so that they can not just operate in the current year but also be able to plan and budget for the future. They need that formula to be rooted in the actual costs of educating their students, and they need the formula to fairly take into account the capacity for a community to raise local tax revenue for schools.

These needs are what led to the development of the Fair School Funding Plan. We've been grateful for the bipartisan work in Ohio over the last two budget cycles to create and partially phase in the Fair School Funding Plan, and we are deeply disappointed that years of hard work, negotiations, and stakeholder testimony and hearings, have been thrown out the window in the House's budget bill.

School districts and public education parents and advocates who were expecting the Fair School Funding Plan to finally be 100% funded in this budget cycle have been hit with a one-two punch. First, Governor DeWine's initial budget purported to fully fund the plan, but it used outdated cost inputs in the funding formula, understating the current cost of educating students. At the same time, it used updated property and income tax assessments which determine a community's ability to fund schools locally. This mismatched data led to \$103 million in school district cuts and decreased the share of school funding covered by the state from 43.3% to 32.2%, putting a larger burden on local property taxes.

Next, the House passed a budget plan that discards the Fair School Funding Plan and goes back to the broken system of residual funding that has held Ohio schools back for decades. This means that school districts would be funded based on what legislators want to spend, rather than based on the actual costs of educating Ohio students. By starting with the Governor's flawed plan and then shifting money around haphazardly, the House's proposal underfunds Ohio public schools by more than \$2 billion, compared to a full realization of the Fair School Funding Plan.

We urge you to restore the fully vetted, bipartisan funding formula, and to calculate funding using updated costs, including the additional costs of educating students with disabilities and students who are English language learners.

While this General Assembly is not legally bound to follow what previous ones have pledged, retaining the Fair School Funding Plan is the pragmatic, common sense choice. Residual funding leaves school districts with no ability to plan from one year to the next, nor does it provide adequate funding to educate Ohio students. The Fair School Funding Plan has broad support because it seeks to finally fix a broken system. Since it has never been fully funded with accurate up-to-date costs, Ohio schools have never seen the full benefit of this funding formula. Throwing it out now would be an admission that the legislature no longer intends to seriously address school funding in a fair and predictable manner.

Ohio students, especially students in school districts without the capacity to raise local funding, will suffer the consequences of this unneeded retreat. There are few issues that bring Republican, Democratic, and Independent voters together as much as our shared desire for quality local public schools in our communities. We hope that you are able to build on this common ground by restoring the Fair School Funding Plan.

Remove the Cap on Funding Reserves

We oppose capping how much funding a school district can keep in reserve. School districts maintain a reserve so that they can absorb an unexpected increase in costs or an unexpected decrease in funding, and right now they have plenty of reasons to anticipate both those scenarios. Inflation and tariffs have the potential to rapidly drive up costs. The future of the Fair School Funding Plan is in doubt due to the House's budget, and the future of federal education funding is in doubt as the administration flirts with abolishing the Department of Education and making federal funding to schools dependent on ideological alignment. On top of that, school districts need to keep at least 25% of their budget in reserve to maintain a strong bond rating.

In short, it would be irresponsible for a school district to only maintain a 30% reserve right now and it's impractical for the legislature to try and determine any cap for a local school district's reserve funds.

The best way to deliver property tax relief is to increase the state share of education funding and leave districts with less of a need for increasing local funding.

Ohio Can't Afford to Further Expand Vouchers

We have cautioned the legislature in the past about the mounting costs of years of private school voucher expansion, which is now more than \$1 billion per year. As some legislators tell us the state doesn't have enough money for the Fair School Funding Plan, it is clear that the strain that vouchers place on the state budget hurts all school districts in Ohio. Yet not all school districts have private school options nearby that would allow families to take advantage of vouchers. This is especially true for Ohio's rural communities, where the population density doesn't support competing education systems.

The answer to this disparity is not to expand public funding to non-chartered, non-public schools. These schools, sparsely regulated in regards to student safety and academics, are less equipped to educate and elevate students than public schools or even chartered non-public schools. Rural students deserve better than a second tier school system; they deserve fully and fairly funded public schools.

We oppose the House bill's "education savings accounts" for non-chartered, non-public schools and home schools, which are simply a voucher by another name. These funds can be used for nearly any expense. The Tampa Bay Times reported on a similar policy in Florida where funds were used for non-educational items like TVs, kayaks, theme park tickets, game consoles and treadmills. This is not how Ohio taxpayers want their money spent.

We also oppose increasing the amount of money for EdChoice vouchers, and we oppose allowing families to receive multiple vouchers for the same student. Until public schools are fully funded, it is absurd to spend even more money on private schools than we already do.

We believe that private schools that receive vouchers should meet the same academic accountability and fiscal transparency requirements that are required of local public schools. If you truly believe in school choice, even the playing field so that parents can make an informed choice about which school is best for their child.

Retain Ohio's Elected State Board of Education

We oppose the House budget's move to change the current composition of the State Board of Education from having 11 elected members and eight appointed members to having just five members, all appointed by the Governor. We also oppose abolishment of the State Board of Education Licensure Fund and the transfer of that responsibility to the Occupational Licensing and Regulatory Fund.

Ohio voters want more of a voice on education issues, not less. This includes having a voice on issues of educator licensure and permitting. Many, if not most, of the elected Board members have spent their careers working in education, as teachers, administrators, and education policy experts. Ohio voters knew what they were doing when they elected these Board members. They were putting educators in positions where they can use their experience and expertise to influence education policy for the better.

Please don't disenfranchise voters by stripping the Board of its elected members.

Respect Collective Bargaining Agreements

We also oppose the provision in the House budget that allows superintendents to completely disregard collective bargaining agreements if they want to reassign teachers to a different grade or school.

Collective bargaining, the ability to shape the teaching and learning conditions within a school system, is what keeps teachers in a district, particularly in districts that have the most challenges. The quickest way to drive teachers out of a district, or even out of the profession, is

to take away what voice they have left within the system. The best way to make sure that we have great teachers in front of every student is to properly fund our schools, then step out of the way and let the collective bargaining process create the conditions that will attract teachers.

These agreements, between educators and their school district, should be respected. If a school district wants to limit seniority rights, that's a discussion for the bargaining table, not for the state budget.

Restore the Public Library Fund

Public libraries are cornerstones of our community that provide an ever-growing range of public services: connecting community members with social services and career resources; helping students with homework; providing free notary services and genealogical research; hosting storytime and other activities for young children; and so much more. Public libraries, along with public schools, are essential to the goal of providing equality of opportunity to all Ohioans.

Ohio has exceptional public libraries due in part to Ohio's Public Library Fund, which receives a dedicated percentage of the state's General Revenue Fund. We supported Governor DeWine's proposal to increase that percentage from 1.7% to 1.75% in this budget and we were disappointed that the House didn't just choose to deny the increase, but chose to restructure the Public Library Fund entirely. We are concerned that funding libraries at a flat amount set by the legislature rather than a percentage of the GRF will make it easier to decrease library funding in the future.

Please add Governor DeWine's Public Library Fund increase back into the budget, and continue the system of the PLF receiving a dedicated percentage of the GRF.

We were also disappointed that the House budget makes funding dependent on adherence to a vague ban against displaying content involving sexuality or gender. Librarians are professionals who are capable of making sure that content and displays are age appropriate. If library users have a specific objection, they can raise that issue with the library's board at a public meeting. If some legislators feel that this content ban is needed, then they should introduce a bill about it that can go through the legislative process, with full opportunities for public participation. This should not be slipped into a 5,000 page budget bill.

This concludes my testimony. I welcome any questions you may have.