

Senate Education Testimony

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in regards to Ohio House Bill 96. My name is Megan Lawhon. As a Gallia County resident, a Gifted Intervention Specialist/Social Studies Educator for Gallipolis City School District, and a parent of two children across both school districts in Gallia County, I am concerned about House Bill 96. Some fiscal changes to the state education budget will create unique challenges for schools in our county and others in Appalachian Ohio. I urge you to reconsider this bill due to the disproportionate harm it would cause to students in rural communities across our state, particularly in Gallia County.

Reduction in State Funding

H.B. 96 aggressively alters the Fair School Funding Plan previously in place. The goal is to decrease state contributions to public school districts according to an established formula. While the state claims it is motivated by the unsustainable expense of the Fair School Funding Plan, it is still constitutionally bound to provide free public education. Instead, lawmakers are leaving local governments and residents to pick up the tab when state funds run out. They are simply hoping this financial gap can be closed at the local level. In some districts in Ohio, this feat seems much more attainable than in southeastern Ohio school districts, where community poverty poses a considerable barrier to educational funding.

Gallia County is home to two public school districts: Gallia County Local School District and Gallipolis City School District. In 2024, 48.3% of Gallipolis City School District revenue was provided by Ohio state funding, with local property taxes making up 20.9% of the total. Gallia County Local School District sourced its funding in a similar manner, with 44.5% of its revenue coming from the state and 29.3% from local property taxes. These funds served a total of 3,910 students over both school districts in 2024. That same year, 99.9% of Gallia County Local students and 63.4% of Gallipolis City students were categorically economically disadvantaged. With an average of 16.6% of their combined student population presenting with disabilities, many students are considered “at risk”. Every day, administrators, teachers, and staff do their best to meet the complex needs of our students. Yet, both school districts experience higher student to nurse, counselor, school psychologist, and speech-language pathologist ratios than the state average. An already impoverished and struggling area like Gallia County simply cannot locally absorb the financial education burden posed by H.B. 96.

Boosting Private over Public Schooling

While state education contributions will decrease with H.B. 96, contributions to community, private, and charter schools will increase from the state budget. As I mentioned before, the loss of state funding for public schools in poor school districts will be unmanageable. Additionally, though, these students will not have the easy option of leaving public schools for private ones. In rural and/or impoverished areas, private educational venues are slim to non-existent. School

choice for these students is usually one choice: the local public school. For the disproportionately poor, a decrease in funding from the state for public schools is a reduction in the quality of education for those children without a choice.

Reducing support of public schools reduces more than schooling in rural communities. Some schools are central locations for community members to receive healthcare, dental care, mental health services, and other necessary services. The school is a place of safety and respite for many students, who otherwise would not have access to these services. Quality care is rarely locally accessible and can require a several-hours drive to access. Therapies, specialists, accelerated programs, food services, vision care, etc. are increasingly offered at school buildings in rural areas out of necessity for local families. Without this access, students would be required to increase school absences to travel for services or simply do without them. Neither choice is acceptable, but this situation will only be aggravated with decreased advocacy for public schools in favor of private schools in rural areas of Ohio.

Conclusion

While addressing Ohio's budgetary needs is important, H.B. 96 does not offer a sustainable or equitable solution. This is especially true for rural communities like Gallia County. It mandates action without offering meaningful support. It assumes capacity where there is often none. And it puts rural students at a further disadvantage in an already unequal educational landscape.

Before passing H.B. 96 in its current form, I urge the committee to collaborate with educators, families, and rural stakeholders to design a plan that supports all Ohio students. By ensuring adequate funding, providing flexible implementation paths, and respecting local expertise, ALL Ohio students will be able to access a public education worthy of the highest praise.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to Ohio's children.

Respectfully,
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