

Testimony for the Senate Education Committee on the Biennial Budget

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on the current biennial budget.

I appreciate you taking time to hear from me and the other constituents who you represent in your decision making. I am Dr. Wendy Strickler, a mother of students in our public schools, a wife of a teacher in our public schools, a professor preparing teachers to teach in all of our schools, and a school board member in a southwest Ohio public school district. In all of these roles, I care deeply about our public schools!

Public schools were created on the premise of serving the common good. Our public schools are the ONLY schools that accept ALL children and are held accountable to the community and the state for all decisions from finance through state audits to learning outcomes through Ohio State Tests and graduation requirements.

When I moved to Ohio to begin my career in 1998, I was surprised to learn that the state funding plan had recently been declared unconstitutional in the DeRolph case. At the time, I thought surely this would be addressed efficiently and effectively, as the stable education of our children was at risk. Decades later, I am still waiting to see our legislature meet this constitutional obligation. The state needs a stable, fair, and predictable funding model to ensure all students have access to a high-quality education.

I have no objection to parent choice when it comes to school options. The choice is to use the resources provided at a free public school or pay for an alternative option the family deems will better meet their needs. There has never been a constitutional mandate that a different choice comes with funding, especially if that means pulling funding from the public good.

The current situation in our district where I serve on the board is that students choosing private schools are now being state funded at 2-3x the amount allotted for students in our public schools. So, with LESS accountability for learning or money management, schools accepting vouchers are getting 2-3x more state funding, up to \$6-8,000 per student compared to the \$808.56 base rate per student in our district. How can you reconcile lesser funds for the common good when we know the following?

- From a civic standpoint, an educated population is more engaged and more invested in community.
- From a fiscal standpoint, an educated individual earns in higher incomes, thereby paying more in taxes.
- From a productivity standpoint, our children are our greatest asset. So, we must provide the resources needed to ensure a strong future.
- From an ethical standpoint, we must protect our most vulnerable: our children.

I am writing to plead with you to seriously consider your obligation to Ohio's children when it comes to funding education in Ohio. When you walk outside today, consider that, of every 10 children you see, 9 of them will likely be attending public school. Will you look them or their parents in the eye and tell them that Ohio isn't committed to giving them the best education? Will you look them in the eye and tell them that Ohio isn't committed to ensuring that, whatever their needs, they will be accepted to a high-quality public school? Through my time in public schools, I have seen children who struggle with reading lose access to their reading specialist and teachers lose access to instructional coaches who were helping them improve their craft because state funding wasn't adequate, leaving districts no choice but to cut valuable resources. I am pleading with you to truly work to find funding solutions that best meet the needs of ALL our Ohio children.

The bi-partisan Fair School Funding model was/is a great start. However, this year there are multiple threats to our district and hundreds of other districts:

- 1) The model is still being funded with 2022 inputs. I don't know if you've bought eggs or gas lately, but I'm not paying 2022 prices for anything. So, public schools, OUR public schools are under-funded at step 1 of the process. The constitution requires that the state fund public education based on what is actually costs. If you do not address these inputs, you are failing our Ohio children.
- 2) The governor's budget includes a reduction in the guarantee for public schools who are getting less in the model since it is not fully implemented and using old inputs. Reducing that guarantee is a loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars multiplying across years for our already UNDER-funded public schools.
- 3) The Ohio House budget includes a cap on cash balance in public districts. Because of the ebb and flow of required levies to fund our schools, the amount in cash reserve will ebb and flow to ensure consistency in access to resources, preparation for emergencies, and better bond ratings for loans. How can this be perceived as negative? And yet, a cap on this is a punishment to school districts that are being fiscally conservative and responsible. This will mean that districts need to return to their constituents for levy increases even more often – something that will be firmly rejected by communities that - are also feeling current inflationary pressures. Ohio's public-school children will suffer.
- 4) The Ohio House budget provides a temporary small increase in funding; however, it is at the expense of the consistency of maintaining plans for fund the Fair School Funding Formula fully in the coming years.

It may sound easy from a distance to suggest the current budget simply requires more local funding. However, requiring more levies puts students in great jeopardy of losing resources, as tax payers are also financially strapped and are less likely to support levies, leading to cuts in course offerings, transportation, and other key aspects that impact the learning environment and potential for our Ohio children. I hope to never again see reading specialists cut from a child who needs additional support to learn the critical life skill of how to read. Both the Governor's and the House's budget proposals fail to meet the constitutional standard set by the DeRolph rulings, which required Ohio to reduce its overreliance on local property taxes and ensure a 'thorough and

efficient' system of public education. As the current budget reduces the state share of funding, Ohio is headed in the wrong directions for our children. It is not only unfair, but it is fiscally and civically irresponsible to not ensure we are providing a Free Appropriate Public Education to EVERY student in Ohio.

I respectfully ask you to take the following actions:

- 1) Please continue phasing the **bipartisan** Fair School Funding Plan, that took years to research, create, and agree upon, into Ohio's budget.
- 2) Update the Fair-School-Funding Formula **inputs to FY24 values** to align with our constitutional mandate.
- 3) **Maintain the guarantee at 100%** until each district is fairly funded.
- 4) **Eliminate the cash balance cap** completely from the budget.
- 5) Consider **an increase in state share from 10% to 20%** to more adequately reflect state share in the education of Ohio children.
- 6) If we are going to continue funding private schools through vouchers, then match what you believe to be the right amount to apply for private schools (\$6,000+) to public schools and require fiscal transparency and strong academic outcomes for all, mandating the same fiscal and achievement accountability measures across all of these institutions.

This would be a start to showing that Ohio cares about the education of all of our students

Providing fair school funding is the minimum we, as Ohio citizens, parents, teachers, and board members, expect of OUR representatives.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

Wendy Strickler
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