

Testimony for Ohio Senators

Forest Hills School District School Board

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 96. We appreciate you taking time to hear from your constituent school boards.

In Forest Hills School District, in suburban Cincinnati, we have been forced to ask our community for two levies: 4.7 and 6.9 mills in the past six years. Prior to these levies, we made close to \$1 million in cuts in order to garner community support for our most recent levy. This led to the loss of 8 staff who directly impacted the classrooms and fewer resources for our kids. Our communities are supportive, but enough is enough. At a time when schools with fewer restrictions and accountability have growing funds, we are at risk of receiving fewer state funds and again having to consider cuts with significant impact on our students, Ohio children.

Currently, Forest Hills School District receives the minimum state share percentage at 10%, and is a ‘guarantee’ district. We are proud to be part of a school community that meets the needs of all students, however in FY24, Forest Hills spent over \$14,500,000 educating students with special needs, while the state funded just over \$1.3 million. This means that our local funds covered 91% of our special needs learner’s education, whereas State support covered less than 10%.

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. Just as it does not make sense for any person to suggest their taxes should only go to the road on which they drive, it does not make sense as part of the greater good to suggest that only the school to which I choose to send my child should be funded.

We must support all of our Ohio children having access to a strong education. This is a right, not a privilege.

The Fair School Funding Model would ensure public schools have the funds needed to fully educate Ohio students. This is important for so many reasons:

- From a civic standpoint, an educated population is more engaged and more invested in the community.
- From a fiscal standpoint, an educated individual earns a higher income (thereby paying more in taxes).
- From a productivity standpoint, our children are our greatest assets. So, we must provide the resources needed to ensure a strong future.

We are writing to plead with you to consider your responsibility to Ohio’s children in funding education in Ohio. When you walk outside today, consider that, of every 10 children you see, 9 of them will likely attend 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? We are asking you to truly work to find funding solutions that best meet the educational needs of ALL our Ohio children.

The bi-partisan Fair School Funding model is a critical part of meeting your obligation to Ohio's children. However, there are several threats to our district and hundreds of other districts:

- 1) The model is recommended to be funded with 2022 inputs. Costs have risen tremendously since 2022. The constitution requires that the state fund public education based on what it actually costs. If you do not address these inputs, you are failing our Ohio children. Please update to reflect 2024 inputs.
- 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 for our already under-funded public schools. Please continue the guarantee currently in effect.
- 3) The current House version does not actually fund based upon the FSFP, but instead proposes a temporary foundation funding, which would disadvantage many public school districts long term by removing stability of funding and would not meet the true cost of educating children in Ohio.
- 4) The current House version includes a 30% cap of cash balance, which ignores the cyclical nature of levies that necessitate the buildup of reserves to maintain operations between levies, negatively impacting school districts' ability to maintain consistency, and prepare for emergencies. As an adult, we are all told to have a minimum 3-month cash reserve on hand for emergencies. The current 30% cap punishes districts maintaining this fiscally responsible stance and negatively impacts bond ratings. Please remove the 30% cap.

State funding is already far under what is required for an adequate education. In FHSD, the Fair School Funding Model provides only 21% of Forest Hills' cost per pupil, despite FHSD being below the average cost per pupil in Hamilton County and the state. Requiring more local levies puts students in great jeopardy of losing resources, as taxpayers are also financially strapped and are less likely to support levies, leading to larger class sizes, cuts in course offerings and transportation, and other key aspects that impact the learning environment and potential for our Ohio 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. We respectfully ask you to continue phasing the **bipartisan** Fair School Funding Plan with the guarantee that took years to research, create, and agree upon, into Ohio's budget. Update the Fair-School-Funding Formula inputs to FY24 values to align with our constitutional mandate and fully fund the research-based bi-partisan Fair School Funding Formula with the guarantee. We also respectfully ask that you consider increasing state share from 10% to 20% to more equitably share the property tax burden on Ohio citizens.

Providing fair school funding is the minimum we, as Ohio citizens, parents, teachers, and board members, expect of OUR representatives. As board members, we will work to ensure that this fair school funding system works in the best interest of our constituents, continuing to ensure efficient and cost-effective budgets for our taxpayers.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

The Forest Hills School District School Board