



Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District

Senate Education Committee

Am. Sub. House Bill 96

16 May, 2025

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Amended Substitute House Bill (HB) 96, the biennial budget.

My name is Malia Lewis and I am the President of the Board of Education for the Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District in Cuyahoga County, where I have served for over 7 years. I am incredibly proud to be bring students from Heights High to testify before you today. These young people are fulfilling our District mission of becoming **responsible citizens** who understand that without active participation in our participatory democracy ceases to exists.

During the 134th Assembly you and your colleagues promised to phase in the Fair School Funding Plan over the course of 3 biennial budgets (6 years) rather than pass the Cupp-Patterson Bill which would have fully implemented the plan in one year. Now, two thirds of the way into that phase-in process, you are reneging on your promise to Ohio's school children. It is too expensive; there isn't enough money. And yet this year over \$1 Billion of public tax dollars were spent on tuition vouchers for well-to-do families who were already sending their children to private schools. And yet there are plans to create tax payer funded Educational Savings Accounts (like those which are imploding the state budgets of Florida and Arizona). Meanwhile Ohio has a rainy-day fund of over \$3.8 Billion.

But back to my District. CH-UH serves about 5000 students from pre-school to grade 12 in an inner-ring majority African-American district. Approximately 20% of our student

body receives special services through IEPs or 504 plans. CH-UH currently receives about \$2300 per student in foundation aid, less than \$12 Million per year. Yet last year we spent about \$19.5 Million from our general fund for special education. In order to ensure that **all** our students have access to the best possible academic, athletic, and artistic programs, we tax ourselves to the hilt through local property tax levys. Residents of Cleveland Heights, University Heights, and the section of South Euclid which attends CH-UH schools are quick to tell you that they have some of the highest real estate tax rates in Ohio.

According to simulations run by the Legislative Services Committee CH-UH stands to lose 3.1% of its estimated state share percentage next fiscal year from 13.1% to 10%, and remain flat from Fiscal Year 26 to Fiscal Year 27. All things being equal, we would need to increase our local property tax levys by those same 3.1% in order to keep our budget flat.

But all things are not equal. Indeed, the proposed budget cost tracker shows a decrease in Special Education Additional Aid of 9.4% in Fiscal Year 26 and 8.5% in Fiscal Year 27, a total decrease of 17.1%. So now, my District would need to make up both the 3.1% cut in state share percentage and the 17.1% cut in special education additional aid through increased local tax levys. This is not a sustainable funding model.

Educating students with special needs has always been more expensive than educating typically-developing students. Educating students with special needs **needs** updated base cost inputs.

HB 96 assumes increased local capacity from our new sexennial property valuations, but it does not factor in the increase in actual costs since 2022 brought about by inflation, shortages (of teachers and bus drivers), tariffs (on the steel used to make school busses), and the ever-increasing price of eggs.

How many of you remember the 1980's programming adage: Garbage In, Garbage Out? Without updated data inputs on actual costs, no formula can return useful results. The Fair School Funding formula needs to be fully implemented with updated inputs. Especially since 90% of Ohio's children attend public schools dependent on this formula.

The Fair School Funding Plan provides an objective, rational, and transparent solution to school funding. Created in collaboration with school district leaders and expert practitioners, it translates real student needs into concrete resources. For example, the

formula accounts for the actual costs of providing essential education components like appropriate class sizes, student support services, and educational technology - resources that directly impact student success in today's world.

On behalf of my students, my district, and the community I serve, I ask that you continue to phase-in the formula with updated base cost inputs. This will provide the stability and predictability our schools need to create accurate financial forecasts and implement sustainable educational programming, and will account for the inflation we are all experiencing.

The Fair School Funding Plan represents more than just a funding formula - it represents our commitment to every Ohio student, family, and community. By fully implementing this plan, we invest in stronger communities, a more competitive workforce, and a brighter future for Ohio. Thank you for your consideration of these crucial next steps in supporting Ohio's educational excellence.

Thank you for taking into account my testimony on behalf of the students in my District.

Malia Lewis

President, Board of Education

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