

Testimony for House Bill 96
Senate Finance Committee
May 27, 2025

Tony Rett

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Finance Committee of the Ohio Senate:

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Tony Rett. I am a parent, a substitute teacher, a PTA member, a taxpayer, and an active member of my community. I bring each of those perspectives with me here today. I would like to address the portion of this bill that funds public education in Ohio.

I dropped my child off at school this morning and drove two hours to be here. As soon as I finish testifying, I will drive two hours back home so I can pick them up from school. I want to start by also recognizing that even this is not something everyone can do. Many of the people I know, friends, coworkers, the parents of my child's classmates, simply cannot afford to take an unpaid day off work or make a four-hour round trip to Columbus. And yet these are the very people for whom public education matters the most: parents and guardians working hard to make ends meet, who want a better life for their children but may not have the time, the resources, or the educational background to advocate for their kids in spaces like this.

This is exactly why public education is so vital. There's a saying among teachers: that parents send us the very best children they have, whatever that may be. That's who we work with, and we give them our love, our care, and our attention every day. But the reverse is true as well: children only bring with them the best parents, guardians, and caregivers they have, and we work with that too. In our public schools, we take everyone. We welcome every child and every family exactly as they are, and we give them all the care and opportunity we can. I'm here today not just for my own child, but for all those families and children who couldn't be here.

The Ohio Constitution makes it clear: in Article VI, Section 2, it says that the General Assembly shall provide and fund a "thorough and efficient system of common schools throughout the state." Yet, despite this clear directive, Ohio's method of funding public education was found unconstitutional by the Ohio Supreme Court in the landmark *DeRolph v. State of Ohio* decision in 1997. That lawsuit, filed on behalf of students and families from districts across Ohio, argued successfully that relying primarily on local property taxes created profound inequalities among school districts.

In its ruling, the Supreme Court agreed, stating unequivocally that Ohio's method of school funding was inherently unequal and failed to meet the constitutional requirement for thorough and efficient schools. Yet despite this decisive ruling, Ohio's lawmakers spent more than 20 years without addressing the fundamental issues identified by the court.

That ruling was 28 years ago. For more than two decades after DeRolph, Ohio's lawmakers failed to meaningfully address the fundamental inequities in how our schools are funded. Then, in 2020, Representatives John Patterson and Bob Cupp introduced the Fair School Funding Plan, a bipartisan effort to finally fix the system and deliver on our constitutional promise. But rather than pass it into law, the legislature gave us what amounted to a pinky promise. They said it would be folded into the budget and phased in over three budget cycles. After 23 years of waiting, the response from the state was, "Let's wait six more."

And now even that pinky promise has been broken. The House has passed a budget that walks away from fully implementing the Fair School Funding Plan. The Senate is now considering whether to follow suit. This is more than a political failure, it is a moral one. A promise was made to the families and students of Ohio, and today, that promise lies broken.

And it's not because the money isn't there. This isn't about a lack of funds. It's about priorities.

In this same budget, we are expanding Voucher Programs in Ohio by nearly \$500 million, double the increase being given to public schools. We're committing \$600 million in public bonds to build a new football stadium for the Cleveland Browns. We've just passed a constitutional amendment to borrow \$2.5 billion to fund infrastructure projects across the state. And we're proposing to flatten the state income tax to 2.75%, a move that will cost the state over \$2.5 billion in lost revenue next year alone.

Ohio has no trouble finding money for the things it values. And by continuing to underfund public schools, the message from the legislature is loud and clear: public education is not one of those priorities.

But it should be.

Because at the end of the day, Ohio's greatest resource, its most valuable asset to current and future employers, is its workforce. Public education is how we build that workforce. It's how we grow the talent, skills, and capacity that will drive our economy forward. When we underfund our schools, we are actively stunting that growth. We are limiting the

quality and potential of Ohio's future workforce. And that decision costs all of us—our businesses, our communities, and our future as a state.

I urge you: do not break this promise. Fully implement and fund the Fair School Funding Plan. Stop messing with the formula. Include current and proper inputs for the costs of our children's education and our communities' ability to support it. Our children and our state deserve nothing less.

Thank you.