



Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today as an interested party on House Bill 96, Ohio's biennial operating budget. My name is Chad Aldis, and I serve as Vice President for Ohio Policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The Fordham Institute is an Ohio nonprofit committed to advancing excellence in education through research, analysis, and policy advocacy. We have offices in Columbus, Dayton, and Washington, D.C. Our Dayton office, through our affiliated foundation, serves as an approved Ohio charter school sponsor.

The K–12 provisions in the budget before you present a critical opportunity to address persistent structural issues in school funding, strengthen school choice, bolster literacy and numeracy, and improve career readiness across the state. I'd like to highlight several key areas and offer recommendations for your consideration.

School Funding: Targeting Resources Where They Matter Most

1. Reforming the Funding Formula Inputs

Ohio's school funding formula must be sustainable and student-centered. We support the governor's recommendation to fully phase in the Cupp-Patterson formula while controlling the inflationary costs associated with updating its inputs. Instead of allowing local or federal spending decisions outside of the funding formula to drive increases, we recommend the legislature enact a modest base increase of 1.5% in both FY26 and FY27.

2. Fixing Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid (DPIA)

DPIA is broken. Due to the Community Eligibility Provision (a federal meals program), current eligibility measures significantly overstate the number of economically disadvantaged students. We urge the Senate to adopt "direct certification" as the standard, which offers a more accurate identification of low-income students. This shift would allow for a meaningful increase in DPIA—from \$422 to \$775 per pupil—and most importantly better target funds to where they are truly needed.

3. Reducing Reliance on Guarantees

Guarantees, while well-intentioned, now operate as subsidies to districts that have lost students or become wealthier. These provisions—while politically popular—distort funding equity. We recommend an accelerated phase-out: reduce guarantee bases to 90% in FY26 and 80% in FY27 and eliminate "supplemental targeted assistance," which unfairly compensates districts losing students to choice programs.

None of these recommendations are radical. They are relatively modest in fiscal terms—\$53 million more in FY26 and \$127 million in FY27 than the governor's proposal. But they represent a major step forward in policy coherence and fiscal discipline; and most importantly, they help ensure dollars go where the students are and the needs greatest.

Charter Schools: Equity and Accountability

1. Increase Facilities Aid and Streamline Access to Unused Buildings

We commend the governor's proposed increase in facilities aid and urge the Senate to maintain this vital funding. Charter schools continue to face inequities due to lack of access to local construction funding. We also strongly support restoring the governor's improvements to the unused facilities law—strengthening enforcement and pricing mechanisms—while adding guardrails to avoid unintended district burdens.

2. Preserve High-Quality Charter School Funding

The current high-quality charter school funding model rewards excellence and should be preserved. The eligibility criteria ensure that only schools demonstrating strong academic results receive additional support. We support embedding this program in statute to help safeguard it against future policy shifts and recommend rolling charter school facilities and quality funding into the main K–12 line item for greater budgetary stability.

Private School Choice: Targeted Improvements

Ohio has made significant strides in recent years in expanding private school choice opportunities across the state. Because of these efforts, we don't believe that any big changes are needed at this time. We oppose the House's creation of an Education Savings Account (ESA) for students in non-chartered, non-tax supported private schools. These schools have chosen to operate outside of the state's accountability and funding systems, based on deeply held religious convictions. While they should be respected for that choice, they have done so knowing that they would not receive taxpayer funding.

We do support a couple of relatively minor changes to private school choice policy. We encourage the Senate to incorporate provisions from SB 191 that create a low-income weight for EdChoice scholarship students. Low-income students require more resources to reach their potential, regardless of school type, and additional scholarship funds will help meet those needs.

We also support aligning the Jon Peterson and Autism scholarships with the charter school funding formula to ensure equity for students with disabilities across sectors. An amendment drafted to SB 44 (Amendment AM_136_0202-2) offers a clear path toward that alignment.

Career Pathways and Workforce Readiness

Ohio's career education framework is ripe for modernization. We support restoring the governor's overhaul of industry-recognized credentials, which would tie graduation credit to credentials that align with workforce demand. We also urge rejection of the proposal to allow work-based learning hours to count toward graduation; such a low bar could undermine student preparation.

To enhance early planning, we support requiring all middle school students to complete a structured career exploration course (Amendment SC0530). This ensures students make informed decisions about high school and beyond.

Finally, we encourage the Senate to adopt Amendments SC0531, SC0532, and SC0534, which would restore funding for career awareness, support high school internships, and establish a data-insight board to link education and workforce outcomes.

Together, these actions would build a more coherent, transparent, and effective career-connected learning system—one that truly prepares all Ohio students for life after high school.

Foundational Learning: Strengthening Math and Literacy

We support restoring the governor’s proposal to require universal reading screeners for grades K–3 and encourage inclusion of provisions from Substitute SB 19 (which includes a host of important policy changes) that would require similar screeners in math. Identifying struggling students early is a key to long-term success.

We also recommend requiring districts to report their math curricula and urge DEW to develop a vetted list of high-quality math programs. Transparency and guidance—without mandates—can help districts adopt rigorous materials.

Additionally, we support Amendment SC0543, which would ensure automatic placement of high-achieving students in eighth-grade Algebra I and create a framework beginning in the early grades to give students the support necessary to be successful. This early gateway is critical for postsecondary STEM opportunities.

Educator Pipeline: Better Data, Smarter Decisions

Teacher shortages are a growing concern, yet data on vacancies is sparse. We urge the Senate to restore the governor’s proposal to require DEW to collect and report teacher vacancy data, and build on it by disaggregating the data by school and subject area (Amendment SC0541). We also support provisions to give school leaders greater discretion in teacher placement, rather than defaulting to seniority.

Conclusion

This budget is more than a fiscal document—it is a moral statement about our priorities as a state. The reforms we recommend are modest in cost but powerful in impact. They focus on driving dollars to students who need them, supporting high-performing public schools of all types, and ensuring that Ohio’s education system prepares students for life after graduation.

We urge you to maintain the bold direction of the governor’s proposals, restore what the House removed, and avoid provisions that would backslide on progress. Let’s double down on what works and build a system that truly puts Ohio students first.

Thank you for your time and leadership. I’m happy to answer any questions you may have.