

Senate Finance Committee

Testimony regarding HB 96

May 27, 2025

Dr. Neal Whitman

Reynoldsburg City Schools Board of Education

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

Thank you for accepting my testimony. As legislative liaison for the Reynoldsburg City Schools Board of Education, I encourage the Committee to preserve the bipartisan Fair School Funding Plan, as it was intended, in the budget for the next biennium.

The plan was a remarkable bipartisan effort that took years of research, deliberations, and revisions, including the plan to phase it in gradually rather than all at once. Although the budget purports to include the final 2 years of the Plan's phase-in, it does so in a way that negates the careful thought that created the Plan.

For the plan to work, you need the most current numbers for two things: How much it costs a community to provide an education for its students (the base cost), and how much of that cost the community should be able to provide (the local share). Many communities, including Reynoldsburg, have seen significant increases in their property tax values and incomes, which have been taken into account in calculating communities' local share for phase 3. However, these communities have **also** seen significant increases in the base cost, including the cost of salaries and benefits to stay competitive, and the cost of new curriculum to comply with state law. These increases have **not** been taken into account for phase 3. In fact, they weren't fully taken into account even in the last biennial budget, which used data from FY2022. So we have state and local shares based on lowball calculations of most communities' base costs. When the combined state and local funding comes up short in FY2026 and FY2027, it will fall to local taxpayers to make up the difference.

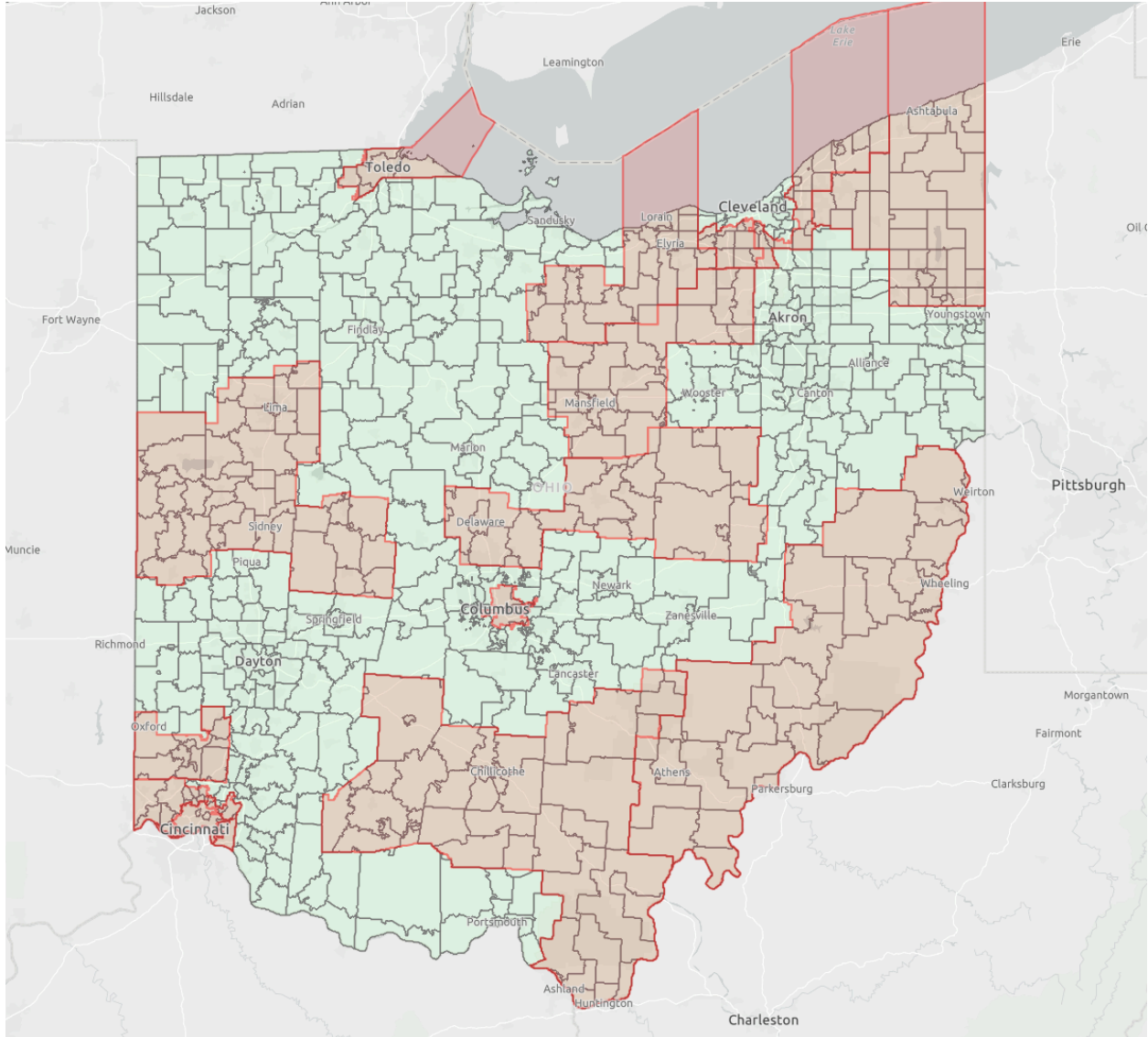
Rather than update the cost numbers for the Fair School Funding Plan, some legislators would like to throw it out entirely. If that happens, the hardest hit will be Appalachian school districts, which are estimated to lose more than half a billion dollars under the House's proposal, according to the Ohio River Valley Institute. Close to 100 Ohio public

school districts are part of Appalachia, and approximately 80 of them are represented partially or entirely by members of this Committee, as can be seen on the map I've included.

Over the next biennium, the Fair School Funding Plan would provide close to \$3 billion in additional funding to Ohio public schools, and it's been said that this is unsustainable. My response is that it is a matter of priorities. For example, the House budget proposes to spend more than half a billion dollars to fund a new stadium for the Cleveland Browns. And even in the education portion of the budget, close to \$1 billion just this past year was sent to private, mostly religious schools in the form of EdChoice vouchers, with more set to follow it this year in the form of recently added education savings accounts. It's wasteful—and unconstitutional—for the State of Ohio to fund multiple school systems. Every student is welcome in our state's public schools. Families not wishing to send their children to public schools have the right to pay out of pocket to send them to private schools or homeschool them. That's how it needs to be if we intend to fund a thorough and efficient public education system for all the kids of Ohio.

Finally, I call on the Finance Committee to remove a budget amendment that has nothing to do with finances, but does continue the attack on our public education system. The proposal to shrink our State Board of Education to a five-member, all-appointed body defeats the entire purpose of having a State Board. The entire reason it was created, by constitutional amendment in 1953, was because there was only a state superintendent who served at the pleasure of the governor. The people had no voice. Removing elected members would remove that voice once again.

Thank you for your time and consideration.



Ohio's 635 public school districts, with Senate Finance Committee member districts overlaid