

Thank you Chair Cirino, Vice-Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and Members of the Senate Education Committee for this opportunity to testify. My name is Ellen Price and I'm speaking on behalf of the League of Women Voters of Oxford. Our country was founded on the belief that self-governance requires an educated electorate. A basic principle of the League of Women Voters is that every person deserves access to a high-quality public education. For that reason we are concerned about aspects of House Sub bill 96 which could harm our district, Talawanda Schools. We urge you not to eliminate the Fair school funding plan, a bi-partisan effort which represents years of planning and data collection to reflect the real costs of educating Ohio's students. It is this gap, between the actual costs and the residual funding currently in the budget that threatens our district. One estimate from Policy Matters Ohio shows our district losing \$1.93 million dollars over the biennium.

Another problem is the 30% cap imposed on schools for their year-end budget carryover. While we understand the need to provide property tax relief, this action penalizes school districts for being careful financial stewards and is at odds with how school budgets actually operate. For example, schools need cash in reserve to pay contracts which may be on a two- year cycle. Also, a school's districts bond rating is linked to their cash reserves, and to be allowed to borrow at the best rate, schools need a minimum of 25% of their total budget in reserve.

We are very proud of the dedicated faculty and staff of Talawanda School District, a successful school district by many measures, with a 4.5 rating on the state report card and a 98% graduation rate. The 4.5 rating represents a marked improvement over past years, a notable achievement despite financial difficulties which arose when an operating levy to support Talawanda schools failed in 2022. The resulting budget shortfall led to multiple cuts that, although necessary, were very difficult for our students and families, especially the decision to eliminate bussing for all high school and elementary students within a two mile radius. Thanks to increased funding in the last budget cycle and increased property tax revenue, Talawanda is beginning to recover. However, the current funding model would mean cuts that would be devastating for the students, faculty and staff.

The Talawanda situation is complex, the presence of Miami University keeps property values high, and the university occupies a considerable amount of tax-free property within Oxford. The apparent wealth of our district by median income is inflated by some very high incomes at Miami University which skew calculations and make us look like a much wealthier district than we really are.

The Talawanda school district, often associated with Oxford and Miami University, extends far beyond the city and is largely comprised of rural families, and according to the ODE Report Card, 39.2% of Talawanda students meet the criteria for "economically disadvantaged." These are the families who are hit hardest when schools have to make up budget shortfalls. Both the 30% cap on the budget carry over and the inadequate level of funding will threaten to reverse our district's positive trajectory. Too often the term "public schools" seems to represent a faceless bureaucracy, but is individual children and teens whose quality of education and future success will be impacted by your budget decisions. Again, thank you Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking member Hicks-Hudson and Members of the Senate Education Committee, for your time and attention today. I very much appreciate your consideration of our concerns.