

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 96. My name is Tracy Russ, and I serve as President of the Board of Education for Licking Heights Schools. With me today are Superintendent Kevin Miller and Treasurer Todd Griffith.

Licking Heights, located in both Franklin and Licking Counties, is one of the fastest-growing school districts in Ohio. We have tripled in size since 2003 and have grown by over 1,200 students in just the last five years. With over 5,400 students, our district is also growing in diversity:

- Nearly 20% of our students are English Language Learners, speaking 52 different home languages.
- More than 56% are economically disadvantaged.
- Over 15% are students with disabilities.

In the decade before the Fair School Funding Plan, **Licking Heights lost nearly \$100 million in state funding due to the funding caps.** As you can imagine, this severely limited our ability to effectively serve students.

However, the Fair School Funding Plan has allowed us to make critical improvements. Kindergarten through second-grade class sizes that sometimes reached over 30 students have been reduced to around 23 students in each classroom. We have also added more English Language Learner teachers, lowering caseloads from 75 to 95 students per teacher to about 60 students—still too high, but we are moving in the right direction. Continued phase-in of the Fair School Funding Plan is essential to reduce that ratio further to support our students.

Additionally, we have expanded high school pathways in a variety of areas, including Engineering, Technology, Software Development, Cybersecurity, and Supply Chain Logistics—helping students graduate with industry credentials and real-world readiness.

The Fair School Funding Plan is making a difference for Licking Heights' students. As a result, **Licking Heights earned a four-and-a-half-star rating on the latest District Report Card—the highest in our district's history. In addition, Licking Heights had the second-highest rate of academic growth among Ohio's 609 school districts.**

Today, on behalf of our students, my district, and the community I serve, I respectfully urge the Senate to:

- Remove temporary “bridge funding” and continue the full phase-in of the Fair School Funding Plan as recommended by Governor DeWine, and
- Update the base cost inputs using FY '24 data.

Licking Heights has the highest property tax rates in Licking County, largely driven by construction costs necessary to keep pace with enrollment growth. Not updating the base cost inputs will upset the balance of the state and local share and increase the financial burden on our district's taxpayers.

We are also deeply concerned about the House-passed provision that reduces property taxes for districts with cash balances over 30% of prior year expenditures and changes the five-year forecast to a three-year forecast. This is problematic for a variety of reasons. Among them:

- It doesn't account for how districts like ours used ESSER funds to offset expenses and extend local dollars. Our carryover would be \$6.5 million lower without that strategic use of federal funds.
- It empowers budget commissions to lower tax rates—but HB 920 means they cannot restore rates without a new vote, forcing districts back to the ballot unnecessarily.
- It ignores the Department of Education and Workforce's own practice of using year three—not year one—of the five-year forecast to evaluate financial stability.
- Most importantly, it undermines local control. Our voters elected my colleagues and me to manage taxpayer funds wisely and transparently—not to have that power stripped by the state.

Capping reserves discourages good fiscal planning. Likewise, replacing the five-year forecast with a three-year model limits transparency and weakens our ability to plan for known levy cycles—when deficits often appear in years four and five.

We urge the Senate to:

- Remove the 30% cash balance provision, and
- Reinstate the five-year forecast requirement.

Chair Cirino and members of the Committee, thank you for your time and for your continued support of Ohio's public schools. We are happy to answer any questions.