

Dear Honorable Chairman Cirino, Ranking Member Paula Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee,

I thank you all for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding House Bill (HB) 96 and ask you to consider the individual needs of all students in public schools throughout the State of Ohio.

My name is Janelle Gasaway. I am a 40+ year resident of Delaware, Ohio and the third of four generations to attend Delaware City Schools. I am also a 2005 graduate of Ohio Wesleyan University, a 2007 graduate of The Ohio State University, a past school employee and substitute, a member of the Delaware City Schools Board of Education, and a member of the Delaware County Republican Central Committee. To sum that up, the right to an education in the State of Ohio has been important in my life and career, and is deeply rooted in the many experiences that have brought me before you today.

On September 11, 2011, my son was diagnosed with a moderate to severe Autism Spectrum Disorder. At that time he displayed receptive, expressive, and pragmatic speech delays (though he was verbal), fine motor delays, sensory processing dysfunction, and hard-to-manage behavioral responses, such as elopement, aggressive meltdowns, and task avoidance. The doctor who diagnosed him told us that our son would never live like a “normal” child and to lower our expectations. He would never have friends, be on a sports team, attend public school, hold a job, or live independently. My husband and I did not accept that that was the fate for our son, whom we saw great potential in for an outstanding and successful life ahead of him.

My son required and was given extensive occupational therapy and speech therapy, as well as social skills building and Applied Behavior Analysis therapy prior to starting Kindergarten. These services cost our family roughly \$100,000 in 2 years. Our goal was for him to start kindergarten in mainstream public school, where his friends and neighbors also attended. Through his hard work, he achieved that in the fall of 2016. Of all the barriers to getting the things he needs to be successful and become a productive citizen, the clearest hurdle has always been the lack of money. Autism is expensive!

In early elementary, our son struggled everyday to assimilate in the classroom. Constantly overwhelmed by his environment and task demand, he was often taken out of class for breaks and remained delayed. His behaviors began to escalate and it became abundantly clear that he needed expertise for his unique level of Autism. My son may not “look Autistic,” because he’s verbal, stems internally, and uses scripted speech, but when you know what to look for or in a moment of crisis, you will see it. We needed people on his team that knew what to look for. After many IEP meetings and emphasizing our rights to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Delaware City

Schools took a new route and invested in my son's future to ensure that his needs are uniquely met. My son was the first student in our District to have a Board Certified Behavioral Analyst (BCBA) and full-time Registered Behavior Technician (RBT) team working to address his disability needs (e.g. sensory processing, executive functioning, the functions of behavior, de-escalation processes, social awareness, social expectation) and allow his teachers to teach. It was a night and day difference for him and our family. He began to learn, make friends, participate in class, and eventually graduated from other therapies. I am thrilled to share that our son is entering his sophomore year with a 3.4 GPA. He is enrolled in Honors classes next year and has goals of entering the Delaware Area Career Center (DACC), and is on track to graduate in 2028. He has starred in school musicals and plays, he's a member of the Men's Ensemble Choir and the Delaware Hayes Swimming & Diving team, and is the lead singer and plays guitar/bass in a local rock band. He holds friendships, has had girlfriends, is smart, talented and has goals for his future. This weekend he began his first job as a Lifeguard for the Delaware City Parks and Rec. My son is a success story that when a school provides the services needed for each individual student's unique needs, they give them the chance to flourish and live a different life. It's all about opportunity.

However, that opportunity is expensive and quickly becomes a financial burden to Districts doing more with a limited amount of funding, which we've seen year after year in Delaware City Schools. It has cost our District between \$14,000 - \$28,000 per year for just the BCBA services alone. For the 2024-2025 school year (not including April - June), in which my son has required the least amount of intervention in his school career, the District has paid \$10,814.00. They also employ a full-time, one-to-one Educational Assistant with a salary of \$24,000 and he has received IEP minutes from three separate Intervention Specialists. This is directly for my child, who is one of many with an IEP in Delaware City Schools and the need grows each year. These mandates have not been fully funded by the State.

When the District is not able to provide the services and environment necessary for a student's success, they sometimes rely on alternative placement. Many times these students' needs are extensive due to aggressive behaviors that threaten the safety of the students themselves, those in class with them, and the staff working with them. In 2024-2025, Delaware City Schools estimated a cost of \$765,000 in alternative placement tuition and \$208,744.84 (through April) in vendor transportation costs (not including transportation directly provided by the District). Transportation costs have risen from \$77,673.09 in FY2021 to \$364,053.64 in FY2024. That's nearly \$1 million dollars this year for less than 10 students spent on mandates that are not fully funded by the State.

Our District has also seen a vast increase in students requiring 504 plans and accommodations under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which include evaluations, plans, and investigations. This number has increased from 435 students in 2022-2023 to 555 students in

2024-2025. A major contributor to this has been an increase in Anxiety, Depression, and Suicidal Ideation primarily in our Middle and High School. The mental health epidemic sweeping our youth has greatly affected our students and staff, requiring us to address concerns to meet each child's unique needs and provide a safe environment in which they can learn and grow. Other identifiers for 504 services may include disabilities such as ADHD, food allergies, chronic diseases such as asthma or diabetes, physical limitations, and learning difficulties. While our District ensures that our students receive equal access to education and can participate in school activities, these mandated services receive zero funding from the State.

In 2019-2020, our District identified 15.9% of our students as having a disability (15.4% state average). That number grew to 18.48% in 2022-2023 (16.8% state average) and is climbing. Our District remains very financially responsible and as such, our Intervention Specialists work caseloads that average 14 students for elementary (16 max), 15-16 students for middle school (16 max), and 20-22 students for high school (24 max). Burnout and turnover is high amongst our Intervention Specialist and Educational Assistants. The cost to provide our District's staff with additional professional development and training is not feasible and the time allotted to do said training is hard to create. Additionally, our District's lack of funds results in many of our Educational Assistants and support staff not making a true liveable wage, though these individuals work with the students of highest need. Caseload coverage and support services are mandates not fully funded by the State.

Additional unfunded mandates include:

- Senate Bill 29/HB 32 Student Data Privacy Compliance
- High Dosage Tutoring (including technology costs)
- Dyslexia Screening and Assessment
- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline documentation
- Threat Assessment Training
- Title IX training, investigation, and decision making
- Course/Curriculum Requirements
- CCP Textbooks
- Science of Reading Training

On behalf of Delaware City Schools and all students/parents/educators/taxpayers across the great State of Ohio, please consider the immense impact that House Bill (HB) 26 will have on all public schools, especially while our Special Education and other required mandates remain unfunded. Without giving our schools the funds necessary to provide services for every student, typical or not, we cannot put forth a productive and enthusiastic future for our state and country. I ask you to please:

- Not decrease the states share of funding in the next Ohio Biennium Budget
- Use current input data (not from 2022) to determine the actual cost to educate
- Fund unfunded Special Needs and Transportation mandates at 100%
- Fully fund the Fair School Funding Plan with these changes
- Remove the clawback provision restricting school cash fund balances to 30% or 90 days

It will be an investment. Our students and their families are worth it. Our communities and cities are worth it. Had Delaware City schools not taken on the financial burden of providing my son with the support he not only needs and depends on, but also lawfully has a right to, my son would not be the success story that he is today. I've demanded that our school follow the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and now I ask the Senate and our State Legislatures to provide all students with a Free and Appropriate Public Education, with an emphasis on *free*. Just think how many more success stories your decisions will impact.

Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Hick-Hudson, members of the committee, and to all in the Ohio Senate, thank you for your time and consideration. I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have at your earliest convenience.

Warm regards,

Janelle Gasaway
325 Tar Heel Drive, Delaware, OH 43015
Cell: 740-272-0550
janelle.gasaway@gmail.com