

Opponent Testimony for HB 96

Derek Burtch

High School English Teacher, Olentangy High School

Executive Director, Erase the Space

To Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Senate Finance Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition to House Bill 96. My name is Derek Burtch. I'm a high school English teacher in the Olentangy Local School District and the executive director of the educational nonprofit Erase the Space. I'm also a parent of two young children.

In all of those roles, I care deeply about what Ohio is doing to — and with — public education. HB 96 doesn't just reduce funding by \$103 million over the next two years — it dismantles the bipartisan Fair School Funding Plan, a plan designed to make school funding more equitable, more transparent, and more responsive to the actual costs of educating students.

Instead, this bill does something alarming. It redirects money away from public schools and into unaccountable private voucher programs — and we need to be honest about how and why that's happening.

Public dollars are increasingly being funneled through Scholarship Granting Organizations, or SGOs, which offer private school scholarships funded by taxpayers in the form of state tax credits. In the last year alone, Ohioans received over \$12 million in tax credits through SGOs — a system that quietly diverts public funds away from schools that serve all students, regardless of background, income, or ability.

At the same time, 501(c)(4) organizations like the Center for Christian Virtue — whose revenue has grown from under half a million dollars in 2015 to over \$4 million today — are using that money to push for policies that expand voucher access and undercut public education. Some of these groups have even received state-funded grants to help religious schools grow. These aren't neutral actors. They're shaping state budgets to benefit private interests at the expense of the public good.

And now, as state investment in public schools is being gutted, we face the possibility of losing local funding too. A petition to abolish property taxes has been approved for circulation — meaning public schools could soon be left without *any* stable funding source.

I teach students preparing to enter the world — as workers, voters, thinkers. They're smart enough to see what's happening. And the question they ask — and the one I ask you — is this: *Why are we giving up on public schools?*

Public education is a public good. It deserves full, fair, and sustainable funding — not the slow erosion this bill sets in motion.

I urge this committee not just to reject the House's version of this budget, but to amend it — to fully restore the Fair School Funding Plan, to remove punitive provisions like the 30% clawback rule, and to realign this budget with Ohio's long-term promise to its public schools and the students they serve.

Thank you for your time — and for your willingness to shape a better version of this budget.