

Opponent Testimony for HB 96

Jamie Lee Finney

Special Education Teacher

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

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in strong opposition to House Bill 96. My name is Jamie Lee Finney, and I am a special education teacher in Columbus. I am writing not only on behalf of my students, but for all of Ohio's children with disabilities who are being left behind by this budget.

HB 96 does far more than reduce school funding by \$103 million over the next two years. It effectively guts the bipartisan Fair School Funding Plan (FSFP), a plan designed to correct decades of inequity in how we fund public schools in Ohio. The FSFP was a commitment to our students, families, and educators that the state would finally fund schools based on the real cost of educating children. This budget walks away from that promise, halfway through its implementation.

In districts across the state, the consequences of abandoning the FSFP are devastating. It means larger class sizes, fewer intervention specialists, and fewer behavioral and mental health supports, resources our special education students cannot afford to lose. These cuts come at a time when needs are rising and services are already stretched thin.

At the same time, this budget increases taxpayer funding for private voucher programs and Scholarship Granting Organizations (SGOs), which quietly divert millions of public dollars into unaccountable private institutions. Last year alone, SGOs received over \$12 million in tax credits, money that should have gone to support students in our public schools, including those with disabilities.

To make matters worse, recent cuts to Medicaid funding have already begun to erode the vital services our special education students depend on. Medicaid pays for essential school-based services, like speech and occupational therapy, mental health counseling, one-on-one aides, and assistive technology, services that schools are legally obligated to provide under IDEA. Without Medicaid support, many districts simply do not have the funds to maintain these services. That means fewer trained professionals, delayed evaluations, and reduced access to communication devices and mobility tools. For students with disabilities, this is not an inconvenience, it's a crisis.

Ohio must step up and fully replace the Medicaid funding our schools have lost. We cannot continue to place the burden of these cuts on our most vulnerable students. If we do not act, the gap between what our students need and what schools can provide will grow unacceptably wide. We are at risk of systematically excluding students with disabilities from the education they are entitled to.

Public education is not a private commodity. It is a public good. And it must be funded like one, equitably, transparently, and sustainably. I urge this committee to reject HB 96 in its current form and amend it to fully restore the Fair School Funding Plan, eliminate punitive provisions like the 30% carryover clawback, and reaffirm Ohio's commitment to every student, regardless of ability or zip code.

Our students are counting on you. Thank you for your time and your service.

Respectfully,

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