

Senate Finance Committee
House Bill 96
May 23, 2025

Chair Jerry Cirino, Vice Chair Brian Chavez, Ranking Member Paula Hicks-Hudson and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on House Bill 96, Ohio's proposed operating budget for fiscal years 2026-27.

My name is Kacy Walko. I am a Westerville and Franklin County resident. I am also the parent of an elementary student and a middle schooler, a PTA Board member, Westerville Parent Council Treasurer and a regular volunteer in the Westerville City School District and community, located in both Franklin and Delaware Counties.

I am here today to beg you to reconsider the drastic changes to school funding proposed in the current state biennial budget.

Under the current proposed budget, Westerville City Schools alone could face a loss of over \$110.5 million in state school funding for the upcoming fiscal year, twice that over the course of the two-year budget period. My understanding is that most other districts across the state will experience detrimental losses as well.

Westerville Schools enrolls almost 15,000 children — 43% of which are economically disadvantaged — across 26 K-12 buildings. About 18% of our student population has a disability, while nearly a quarter of our student population is identified as gifted. With about 50 countries and 80 languages represented in Westerville Schools, approximately 11% of our students are English language learners.

What does that mean? It means more than half of our students learn differently. No two students are alike and each has unique needs. As a result, these students count on qualified, experienced, empathetic teachers and administrators to provide them with a solid, consistent education that will serve them well throughout their K-12 years and the remainder of their lives.

Thankfully, 75% of Westerville's current teaching staff members have a master's degree and 64% have more than ten years of experience. My children have incredible teachers in incredible schools. Teachers who have not only taught them more than many adults know in the few short years they've been in their care but educators who teach in ways that help them to absorb and use information in impactful ways that they enjoy and which work for their neurodivergent, unique and creative brains.

Right now, my children have the opportunity to learn not only math, English, language arts, social studies and science but also experience hands-on learning and experiences around the arts, STEAM, career choices, life skills, their local community, state, country and other countries and cultures around the world.

In the six years they have been in Westerville schools, my kids alone have participated in advanced courses, book club, chess club, art club, movie club, running club, drama club, sports and more. They have enjoyed music and performing arts performances and reading, fine arts and geography competitions. One participated in a self-contained gifted classroom while the other receives gifted intervention.

At the rate my children are learning right now, they are already skipping grade levels and will have the chance to participate in Advanced Placement courses, College Credit Plus and even the International Baccalaureate Program.

My children's teachers took time to become certified to teach. These teachers and staff sacrifice their own personal time, families and financial resources to give my kids what they need to learn and retain information, treat other people the way they'd like to be treated, move their bodies and care for their own mental health and the wellbeing of others. They do this on top of setting up their classrooms, establishing

lesson plans, regularly communicating with families and reacting and adapting to student challenges and parenting concerns.

We have caring, qualified, ethical leaders in place in the form of our Westerville City Schools Board of Education, our superintendent and other district and building administrators. I have witnessed first-hand the thought, care and forward-thinking strategy they put into their jobs every day and the time they spend after hours supporting the district.

As an involved volunteer, I've seen them work hard to set up the district for success and give our students the best school experience possible while managing and stretching tax dollars responsibly and ethically and with common sense.

Our parent-teacher organizations are filled with volunteers who, despite being busy with their own families, jobs and other responsibilities, give their time, skills, knowledge and money freely to support our schools because they believe in them.

My children are thriving.

All this, despite the COVID years. The pandemic already stripped my children of at least two years of regular learning and school experiences. As their mother, I sacrificed these years supporting them at home, working not only as their mother, but also their teacher, coach, counselor and more.

Yet, just as schools have finally returned to normal, our own state government is about to make a budget decision that will decimate state funding, eternally changing the education system as we know it over the course of a single summer.

Our public schools provide not only education and a safe space and often for our students, but a future.

If the budget goes through as planned, you will potentially steal my children's remaining educational opportunities from them and therefore, their futures.

There will be substantial cuts in programs and services, likely down to minimum state and federal requirements.

That means elective courses, extracurricular activities, clubs, field trips and even supplies and transportation may no longer be available. The friendships they've forged will be sacrificed as students are forced to leave public schools to find alternative education to meet their needs.

With resources stripped from public education, children left behind will experience a subpar education and additional challenges with what's left.

All of this will cost both our state and individual families more time and resources overall because there will no longer be economies of scale, nor a standardized, consistent approach to education where schools and staff are held accountable to high standards.

Instead, the bulk of funding will go to private school vouchers and a professional sports stadium in a City two hours from here. Paying top dollar for private school vouchers is not sustainable if you expect the majority of students to switch to private, charter or other non-public school options using vouchers. And it's not fair to those who remain in public schools.

But why do that anyway, when more than 80% of Ohio students currently are PUBLIC school students? Why not focus our funding and resources on this majority, which is available to all?

Do problems exist in our schools? Yes. Of course they do. And when things go wrong or could be better, I'm one of the first people to point those things out. But how does abruptly taking tax dollars from our kids help them or our communities or state?

The fact is, it doesn't. The proposed budget will decimate education. Kids won't be supported. Teachers won't be supported. And who will be expected to step in and fill the void? Mothers. And the mothers are all out of spoons.

Are homeschooling and private schools good options for students? They can be, but they are not for everyone and certainly not at the expense of the majority of children in our state.

I appreciate your ear today and the work the General Assembly, and this committee in particular, do to support Ohio's public schools.

Relative to House Bill 96, I urge you to:

- Fully fund the Fair School Funding Plan using 2025 data rather than outdated 2022 figures
- Increase funding for special education to ensure every student receives the support they need
- Stop unfunded mandates
- Remove the provision restricting school cash balances to 30% or 90 days

Let our teachers continue to focus on educating and supporting children. Let our administrators focus on their buildings and staff instead of perpetual levies. Let taxpayer dollars support all students. Most importantly, don't disrupt our children's learning.

Chair Cirino and members of the committee, thank you for taking time to hear and consider my testimony today as you work together with one another, the Ohio House and Governor DeWine to finalize our state's biennial budget.

Most of all, thank you for your consideration of the 1.5 million children in 611 school districts across Ohio who count on you to provide them with a solid education, safe schools and a viable future.

Don't let them — or our state — down.

Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kacy Walko | kacywalko@yahoo.com | 614.226.4160
Mother to students in the Westerville City School District
Westerville, Franklin County & Ohio Resident