

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on House Bill 96.

My name is

Emma Nelson, and I am a parent to three children in Westerville City Schools, as well as the Executive Director of the Westerville Education Foundation (WEF), a charity that supports innovative projects for classroom teachers and student organizations that enhance learning in the Westerville City School District.

As a parent, I am deeply concerned about the proposed budget and cuts to public education. My husband and I were born and raised in Ohio, and are business owners in Ohio. However, as we look at what may become of public education in Ohio, we are being forced to have discussions about moving out of state to ensure a strong education for our children. Families in Ohio should not have to face leaving their communities and support systems to ensure their children receive a sound education.

Fair School Funding Plan: Preserve the Phase-In and Update Base Cost Inputs

I am asking you to restore the Fair School Funding Plan in the budget bill, and use more recent cost models that reflect the actual cost of educating students in our communities.

Our children deserve more, not less from public education. If the House changes go through, our children will all receive less, a lot less.

I urge the Senate to:

- Remove temporary “bridge funding” and maintain the phase-in as proposed by Governor DeWine;
- Update the base cost inputs to reflect current costs, such as staffing, class sizes, and services; and
- Maintain guarantees until full implementation of the FSFP is complete, including updated categorical funding.

Without updated base costs, districts like mine risk being penalized even as other formula inputs—such as property valuations or income data—are refreshed. This creates structural imbalance and shifts more of the funding burden onto local taxpayers.

Cash Balance Cap & Five-Year Forecast Elimination

Under the House-passed version of HB 96, districts with a carryover balance above 30% of the prior year’s expenditures could face property tax reductions. For districts like mine, this would create serious planning challenges.

Ohio collects property taxes in arrears, which means that any reduction triggered by a June 30 balance wouldn’t affect collections until 18 months later—long after the budget for the affected year has been adopted.

Like families, schools need cash reserves. In Westerville we build and maintain our cash reserves to:

- Manage levy cycles and avoid frequent ballot issues;
- Navigate cash flow gaps due to the timing of tax collections and state payments;
- Sustain capital, maintenance, or strategic plans; and
- Support the district's bond rating and financial stability.

Capping cash balances punishes districts for planning for emergencies, would undercut responsible financial planning and could increase long-term costs for both school districts and local taxpayers.

It could also increase the risk of a district defaulting on the terms of their debt if a district has to tap a mandated lower cash balance to meet an emergency need. As someone with years of experience with tax exempt bond financing I can assure you that these kinds of defaults can have devastating consequences for the borrower.

In addition, replacing the five-year forecast with a three-year projection would weaken District ability to plan ahead, monitor for emerging deficits, and communicate with our communities. Years four and five are often when deficits appear—particularly in districts dependent on levy Renewals.

I urge the Senate to:

- Remove the 30% cash balance provision from HB 96; and
- Reinstate the five-year forecast requirement to ensure long-term financial transparency.
- Robustly support the mission of free public education for all children as it is the foundation of our success as a nation and democracy.

Thank you for your consideration of these crucial next steps in supporting Ohio's educational Excellence. Chair Cirino and members of the committee, thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Emma Nelson
1170 Oak Bluff Ct.
Westerville, Ohio 43081