

Testimony

Provided to the Ohio Senate Finance Committee

INTERESTED PARTY

HB 96: Creates FY 2026-2027 Operating Budget

PROVIDED BY:

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Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee, thank you for allowing me to share my perspective on House Bill 96 and the Fair School Funding Formula. I am a parent of two students in the Talawanda School District in Oxford, Ohio, and an alumnus of this district. I am the former President of the Parent-Teacher Group for one of our elementary schools and was co-chair of our levy campaign in 2022, a levy that we failed to pass.

Our school district spans approximately 140 square miles, making it a large district by land size; our current enrollment is approximately 3,000 students. Included in our district is one of the gems of Ohio's public higher education, Miami University, and a significant amount of agricultural land, both of which contribute to our district's appearance of wealth. However, it may not accurately reflect its actual wealth. Of the ten school districts in Butler County, we receive the lowest percentage of state funding, even with a guarantee.

We are very proud of the dedicated faculty and staff of Talawanda School District, a successful school district by many measures, with a 4.5 rating on the state report card and a 98% graduation rate. The 4.5 rating represents a marked improvement over past years, a notable achievement despite financial difficulties that arose when an operating levy to support Talawanda schools failed in 2022. The resulting budget shortfall led to multiple cuts that, although necessary, were very difficult for our students and families. Eliminating services such as busing for all students and gifted teachers in each elementary school, and reducing mental health resources, guidance counselors, and social workers in our schools had a significant impact on our children. While the district is slowly crawling back some of the services and personnel that had to be eliminated due to the failed levy, the current funding model would mean cuts that would be devastating for the students, faculty, and staff.

Talawanda is one of the only "open districts" in Butler County; this means we educate children who have been removed from other school districts due to various reasons and those who require specialized services, something only Talawanda offers in our area. Here is an example of the students Talawanda educates as part of our open enrollment policy - a close friend who

lives in the Ross Local School District is a foster parent, and one of her foster children has significant mental health challenges. When my friend went to enroll her foster child in school at Ross, the staff at Ross suggested that she open-enroll her foster child at Talawanda because "Talawanda is better suited for the needs of her foster child." While Talawanda receives some of the cost to educate children like my friend's foster child, the district does not receive the entire cost to educate these children. And we receive the lowest state share out of the districts in Butler County.

In last month's Senate Education Committee meeting, several individuals testified in favor of or against increased voucher spending and the educational spending accounts as part of the EdChoice program. I believe parents should be able to send their kids to whatever school they want, and I support vouchers as they were originally intended and introduced in the mid-90s. But I want to point out a simple fact that I think has been glossed over - the availability of private schools in rural communities and the impact the voucher programs have on rural communities. Programs like EdChoice do not provide students in rural communities a choice, and they do significant harm to the education these students receive because they are taking money from public schools. Our only "choice" is public schools.

I want to paint a picture for you; it's a Thursday night in late September, early October, and the entire town is lined up along High Street in uptown Oxford. It is the annual Talawanda homecoming parade, and regardless of your political leanings, everyone is there to cheer on our kids who attend Talawanda schools. There are big rigs, fire trucks, flat-bed trucks, you name it, there's a team or organization on it - that is the picture I see when I think about public schools in rural America.

And unfortunately, I also see programs like EdChoice slowly chipping away at small-town communities like Oxford and our public school district. We do not have another option. We want our friends, neighbors, and community members who work in the district to make a livable wage. We want our community and students to thrive, and without a strong public school system that is well-funded, our community will not survive.