

**Senate Finance Committee
House Bill 96
Willoughby-Eastlake City Schools
June 6, 2025**

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Substitute House Bill (HB) 96. My name is Jaime Shatsman and I serve as the Vice President and Legislative Liaison for the Willoughby-Eastlake Board of Education. I am also proud to be the mother of a rising fifth grader, a home-owner, and a registered voter in the city of Eastlake.

The Willoughby- Eastlake school district is the 33rd largest in the State of Ohio. We serve 7 municipalities in Northeast Ohio and educate roughly 7,000 students per year with a \$111M annual operating budget. I'm submitting this testimony to ask you to consider the potential unintended consequences that the current budget could have on our school district and the 66,000 voters that choose to live and raise families here. Through careful planning, collaboration with our community, and strategically investing for maximum impact, Willoughby-Eastlake schools are in a stable financial position for the first time in 50 years. As a result of this foresight, we made promises to our community that we are on track to fulfill. Unfortunately, the Senate version of HB 96 would make it virtually impossible for Willoughby-Eastlake to uphold our commitments to our community.

As a follow-up to this testimony, I - or the Willoughby-Eastlake Treasurer, Mr. Ciarniello - would be happy to provide any additional financial information about our annual expenditures, the average cost to educate a student in Willoughby-Eastlake, our current cash balance, our forecasts, and/or our capital improvement plan. However, this is a snapshot of the information most relevant to the Senate version of the biennium budget and its disproportionate impact on our district:

- Willoughby-Eastlake is on the 20 mil floor for class 1 residential property.
- Willoughby-Eastlake is primarily funded through 5 emergency, or "fixed sum" levies.
- 4 of these 5 levies originally passed prior to 2013 and qualify for the 12.5% homestead and rollback credits.
- The last time we were on the ballot for "new" or additional money was in 2019.
- Twice in 2019, our community voted against a continuous operating levy for additional resources in perpetuity.
- In 2020, the voters approved an emergency levy that generates a fixed \$8.5 million per year for a 10 year period.
- Willoughby-Eastlake has recently undergone a leadership transformation. Each of our current board members are in their first term of service. Dr. Patrick Ward will begin his third year as our superintendent this fall.

As someone who has watched months of testimony in both the house and senate committees on HB 96, I want to express my appreciation for the immense amount of work that goes into

balancing the state budget. And, that's why, perhaps surprisingly, I'm not asking for additional money for our school district. Actually, I agree with many of the points I've heard this committee make. For example, I agree that the name emergency levy is both confusing and inconsistent with the manner in which these fixed-sum levies have been used in districts like mine. I also understand the urgent need for property tax relief, particularly for older Ohioans who are on a fixed income. And, I agree that continuing to invest in public education without acknowledging that schools need to shift to reflect the changing world in front of us is not a sustainable path forward. In order to prepare students for life after graduation, Willoughby-Eastlake is leading the way by reimagining what school looks like through flexible learning models, workforce development that starts at the middle level, and giving elementary students voice and choice in their academic pursuits. We still have significant work ahead of us, but we have a clear path forward. At least we did have a clear path forward. But we are simply unable to uphold our end if the rules of engagement suddenly change. As fellow elected officials, I'm confident that you understand how breaking the promises we made to our community would erode all trust in our district.

My goal is not to debate the fairness of the 20 mil floor or to argue for or against certain types of levies. Instead, I want to bring to your attention to the predicament we are in. While I don't believe we are unique in our use of emergency levies, our reliance on emergency levies as our primary funding source make our district an outlier. For better or worse, our predecessors used emergency levies to operate our school district. And, our community has repeatedly voiced and demonstrated at the ballot box that they prefer time-limited levies. As someone who worked on the levy campaign before becoming a member of our school board, I spoke with a number of voters who felt that emergency levies were the mechanism our community uses to hold our schools accountable. Under current law, this was a viable and sustainable solution. But the current Senate version of the budget would change the game.

Our school district has deliberately stayed out of the conversation where public schools across the state have requested additional revenue. We were not counting on or expecting additional state dollars. We are simply asking you not to change the rules regarding the local share. And, if you must change them, please give us enough time to adapt. We made promises to our residents based on the way things have worked since the 1970s. Further, we've made investments in capital improvements, curriculum, and programming that we simply cannot undo immediately. In partnership with our community, we can adapt to the changing landscape if necessary. Yet, implementing these changes this calendar year has the potential to strip away the significant progress we've made in such a short period of time. I am unwilling to believe that any members of your committee want that outcome for us. Please work with us to find a viable alternative.

In closing, the Willoughby-Eastlake Superintendent, Treasurer, and Board of Education are available to discuss specifics with any member of this committee at your convenience to work towards a mutually beneficial outcome. In the meantime, I have heard your committee ask for practical suggestions so I will take the liberty to provide a few of my own ideas here:

- Convert all emergency levies to current operating levies. This will serve the dual purpose of preserving the homestead and rollback credits while also accomplishing the goal of including all levies in the 20 mil floor calculation.
- Modify the 20 mil floor on a go forward basis rather than retroactively.
- Create a mechanism for school boards to forgo levy collection to provide targeted tax relief. Right now, if we were to forgo the entire amount we received in additional revenue from being at the floor, it would benefit most those who need it the least. While commercial property owners and those with the most expensive houses might receive a meaningful tax decrease, the average homeowner in our district would get roughly \$100 off of their tax bill.
- Enable school boards to provide relief to class 1 properties without impacting collection from class 2 properties. Particularly when only class 1 properties are facing an increase from the 20 mil floor.
- Let Ohioans vote on these significant changes before enacting them.

Thank you again for your time and attention. We welcome further discussions and urge you to reconsider the unintended consequences of enacting this game-changing legislation too quickly.