



June 6, 2025

Senate Finance Committee

Interested Party Testimony on HB 96

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Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on HB 96, Ohio's next biennial budget. The Ohio Federation of Teachers represents teachers and school support staff in traditional public schools and charter schools, higher education faculty and staff, librarians and library workers, and social work professionals.

Ohio's Public Schools Need the Real Fair School Funding Plan

Ohio's public school districts need a predictable funding formula so that they can not just operate in the current year but also be able to plan and budget for the future. They need that formula to be rooted in the actual, up-to-date costs of educating their students, and they need the formula to fairly take into account the capacity for a community to raise local tax revenue for schools. These needs are what led to the development of the Fair School Funding Plan.

We are disappointed that the Senate sub bill does not follow the direction of the Fair School Funding Plan, but we are even more disappointed to see Senators claim that this bill "completes the phase in of the Fair School Funding Plan." This simply isn't true. This is not the Fair School Funding Plan.

The entire basis of the Fair School Funding Plan is that we should figure out how much it costs for a school district to educate their student population, and then the state should provide funding in line with that amount and with the school district's ability to raise funds locally.

First, fidelity to the Fair School Funding Plan demands using accurate and up-to-date data about the costs that school districts incur educating their students. This bill uses data on costs from 2022, while using current property and income tax assessments which determine a community's ability to fund schools locally. This mismatched data underestimates a district's expenses and overestimates their ability to raise funds locally, creating a massive budget shortfall for many districts.

Second, the full vision of the Fair School Funding Plan was to provide extra funds for students with disabilities and students who are learning English. This budget does not do that. The Fair School Funding Plan was also intended to include increased funding for students from low-income households. This budget changes the qualifications for Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid (DPIA) so that fewer students qualify and schools have less money to support the needs of low-income students.

Third, rather than doing the things I just mentioned – which are essential to the effectiveness of the Fair School Funding Plan – this budget creates a whole new criteria for awarding extra funds, performance on standardized tests. There is a well documented correlation between income and performance on test scores. Providing additional funds to school districts based on performance, rather than funding school districts based on the actual costs of education, heightens inequities between wealthy and not wealthy. This is the exact opposite of what the Fair School Funding Plan was intended to do. This additional funding should be reallocated based on the Fair School Funding Plan.

Finally, the Fair School Funding Plan was intended to be predictable so that school districts could budget beyond the next year or two. However, if districts don't know what year cost data will be pulled from or don't know that the legislature will create new ways of determining funding (such as performance), that eliminates the predictability that superintendents and treasurers have asked for.

We urge you to either fully follow the Fair School Funding Plan, or at least be honest with voters that this budget is a half measure at best.

Remove the Cap on Funding Reserves

We oppose capping how much funding a school district can keep in reserve.

School districts maintain a reserve so that they can absorb an unexpected increase in costs or an unexpected decrease in funding, and right now they have plenty of reasons to anticipate both those scenarios. Inflation and tariffs have the potential to rapidly drive up costs, while there are many doubts about the long-term future of state and federal funding. On top of that, school districts need to keep at least 25% of their budget in reserve to maintain a strong bond rating.

While a 50% cap is slightly less onerous than the 30% cap in the House budget, it is still an unnecessary limitation that will harm a school district's readiness in the face of unexpected costs. The best way to deliver property tax relief is to increase the state share of education funding and leave districts with less of a need for increasing local funding. Property tax reform should not be accomplished on the backs of our public school students.

Retain Ohio's Elected State Board of Education

We oppose changing the composition of the State Board of Education from having 11 elected members and eight appointed members to having just five members, all appointed by the Governor. We also oppose abolishment of the State Board of Education Licensure Fund and the transfer of that responsibility to the Occupational Licensing and Regulatory Fund.

Ohio voters want more of a voice on education issues, not less. This includes having a voice on issues of educator licensure and permitting. Many, if not most, of the elected Board members have spent their careers working in education, as teachers, administrators, and education policy experts. Ohio voters knew what they were doing when they elected these Board members. They were putting educators in positions where they can use their experience and expertise to influence education policy for the better.

Please don't disenfranchise voters by stripping the Board of its elected members.

Respect Collective Bargaining Agreements

We also oppose the provision in the budget bill that allows superintendents to completely disregard collective bargaining agreements if they want to reassign teachers to a different grade or school.

Collective bargaining, the ability to shape the teaching and learning conditions within a school system, is what keeps teachers in a district, particularly in districts that have the most challenges. The quickest way to drive teachers out of a district, or even out of the profession, is to take away what voice they have left within the system. The best way to make sure that we have great teachers in front of every student is to properly fund our schools, then step out of the way and let the collective bargaining process create the conditions that will attract teachers.

These agreements, between educators and their school district, should be respected. If a school district wants to limit seniority rights, that's a discussion for the bargaining table, not for the state budget.

Restore the Public Library Fund

Public libraries are cornerstones of our community that provide an ever-growing range of public services: connecting community members with social services and career resources; helping students with homework; providing free notary services and genealogical research; hosting storytime and other activities for young children; and so much more. Public libraries, along with public schools, are essential to the goal of providing equality of opportunity to all Ohioans.

Ohio has exceptional public libraries due in part to Ohio's Public Library Fund, which receives a dedicated percentage of the state's General Revenue Fund. We supported Governor DeWine's proposal to increase that percentage from 1.7% to 1.75% in this budget and we are disappointed that the House and Senate budgets don't just deny the increase, but restructure the Public Library Fund entirely. We are concerned that funding libraries at a flat amount set by the legislature rather than a percentage of the GRF will make it easier to decrease library funding in the future.

Please add Governor DeWine's Public Library Fund increase back into the budget, and continue the system of the PLF receiving a dedicated percentage of the GRF.

We were also disappointed that this budget bill makes funding dependent on adherence to a vague ban against displaying content involving sexuality or gender. Librarians are professionals who are capable of making sure that content and displays are age appropriate. If library users have a specific objection, they can raise that issue with the library's board at a public meeting. If some legislators feel that this content ban is needed, then they should introduce a bill about it that can go through the legislative process, with full opportunities for public participation. This should not be slipped into a 5,000 page budget bill.

Detach Teacher Evaluation from Teacher Licensure

OFT supports the removal of the video component of the Resident Educator program; however, we are opposed to allowing a teacher's evaluation to be used as part of the licensure process. The evaluation process was not designed to be used as a factor in determining licensure but rather as a tool to identify strengths and weaknesses and to guide professional growth. We ask for removal of language that would tie the two processes together.