

Meredith E. Wickham
Director
Substitute House Bill 96
Interested Party Testimony

Friday, June 6, 2025

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and distinguished members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is Meredith Wickham; I am the Director of Southwest Public Libraries, a school district library system headquartered in Grove City, Ohio serving South Western City Schools, the fifth largest school district in Ohio. Approximately 150,000 people live in our district, which includes 4 townships in the southwest quadrant of Franklin County, plus a substantial portion of the City of Columbus.

I am honored to share with you today on behalf of my libraries and the work we do for our dynamic and rapidly growing community.

On a recent morning, I arrived at my library a little later than usual and couldn't find a parking spot. As I circled the lot, trying to find a space, I wondered what was going on. It wasn't Taco Tuesday at the nearby restaurant. There wasn't a major school tour scheduled that day. I didn't know of a giant meeting happening, like that of our local Realtors' Association. Once I had found a spot and headed to the entrance, I realized: I had arrived during storytime. This popular weekly program easily fills up our biggest room, with a huge crowd of regulars in attendance.

Every week, our libraries build the future of our community by providing research-supported early literacy programming to get our youngest citizens ready for success in school and preparing them to thrive in life. Following the decrease in Public Library Fund (PLF) disbursements during the last biennium, my library system, which depends upon the PLF for 62% of our operating budget, had to lay off staff and cut back on programs, materials and services.

We did everything possible to retain early literacy programming at our previous level, but with staffing so tight, two weekly storytimes among other programs were eliminated.

Senators, I am respectfully requesting that you eliminate the \$10.2M deduction from the PLF for multiple state agencies. We do not want to lose another storytime.

Economies of Scale:

This September, I will have been a director of libraries for 10 years. Before that I served in several different roles in libraries, with a background in Children's Services and a focus on serving teens. My service has taken place in three states: South Carolina, Mississippi, and most recently Ohio. This multi-state perspective has given me a unique understanding of Ohio libraries.

When contemplating any alteration to the Public Library Fund, I am concerned about the loss of the beneficial economies of scale I have witnessed here.

My library system benefits from being able to take place in statewide consortia for interlibrary loans, for collection sharing, for ebook purchasing and even for maintenance of our email accounts. SPL patrons have access to over 230,000 physical items from our collection. However, as participants in the Central Library Consortium (CLC), our patrons have access to over 5 million items. My library circulated over 1 million items last year; the CLC circulated over 26 million altogether.

In other states, this is simply not possible. When library directors discuss resource sharing and collaboration in other states, there is often an unavoidable impediment to the implementation: finances. When the funding is locally sourced, it becomes fiscally irresponsible of one library to spend their community's money on another population. When the funding comes from a shared source, this can be justified. Because the PLF is funded by all Ohioans, all public libraries in the state are able to more easily share materials, use our purchasing power to negotiate better rates with vendors and publishers and maximize taxpayer dollars without nickel and diming each other.

Here in Ohio, we share easily and often. Every taxpayer dollar can go much further because of those collaborations. And then those massive economies of scale result in huge returns on investment (ROI) for local libraries, even the smaller ones, the rural ones and the ones whose communities can't afford much because their property tax values or populations are less robust. Nobody is left behind.

Ohio's state funding ensures every Ohioan can have access to information, resources and materials for workforce development and educational advancement. That is something to celebrate.

On behalf of my library system, I respectfully urge the Senate to fund the PLF for the 2026-27 biennium at the level originally proposed in the Executive Budget.



Trust Parents:

As you contemplate Ohio's library funding, I would like to express my concern about section 3375.47 of the Senate budget as it is proposed today.

Our library system has been successfully selecting, cataloging, and placing materials in our libraries for over 100 years. Based on our interpretation of this bill, SPL would need to structurally redesign our spaces, modifying the layouts of our welcoming libraries in order to be compliant. We considered relocating the materials requiring review to the second floor; however, the architect has informed me the floor will not hold the extra weight of these materials. We have a total of 90,073 physical items in the Children's and Teen sections, and it is going to take us significant staff time to review, relabel, and re-catalog them. This leaves us with several burdens: a shortfall in staffing, funding, and space.

This proposed law poses grave concerns for me about a parent's right to choose what is best for their child. Our libraries do not act *in loco parentis* regarding the selection of library materials for juvenile patrons. We have always respected each parent's right to select materials and to supervise their child's choice of materials based on their family's values. We have families in our district with very different expectations for their children, and we respect their choices.

In addition to letting parents choose which materials they find best suited for their children; we also invite our patrons to voice their concerns regarding the materials in our collection. We have a formal review process that has been in place for decades and which works for our community.

My current assessment as to the cost of this unfunded mandate is almost \$450,000 annually and \$1,797,579 to start (see chart below). Establishing compliance with this new law, which none of our community has asked for and which may anger many parents, given the loss of their parental rights, would unnecessarily take staff away from core duties.

I ask each of you as members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee to remove this proposed language which could do so much harm. The parents in the community I serve know what is best for their children.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.



Anticipated Cost to Comply with Section 3375.47:

Item	Calculation ¹	One-Time Costs	Estimated On-Going Annual Costs ²
Librarian to ensure compliance	full-time librarian at each location	\$150,000	\$156,000.00
Staff Members time reviewing new materials	New materials estimated 11,489 and 1,436 hours x \$28.33 (average Tech Systems rate inc. benefits)		\$42,309.28
Librarians time reviewing new materials Tech Systems tagged	1,148 using 60 minute review for materials in depth review x \$31.87		\$36,582.00
Develop internal policy to comply with censored materials	10 hours x \$810/hour for legal review	\$8,100	
Staff time to reorganize	4 weeks/WAL 6 weeks/GCL - locations to be closed during this period	\$210,570	
Staff time to review children's materials estimated	75,533 materials x 5 minutes each = 6,294 hours x \$30.64 average rate inc benefits	\$192,848	
Staff time to review teen materials estimated	8,079 materials x 10 minutes each = 1,347 hours x \$30.64 average rate inc. benefits	\$41,272	
Staff time to review adult materials estimated	106,927 materials x 10 minutes each = 17,821 hours x \$30.64 average rate inc. benefits	\$546,035	
Staff time to review A/V items estimated	48,673 items x 10 minutes each = 8,112 hours x \$30.64 average rate inc. benefits	\$248,552	
Monitor access	open hours 4,356 (2 locations) x \$30.64 (average rate inc. benefits) x 2 staff at each location	\$200,202	\$208,209.83
Shelf modifications	Additional shelving \$5,000 x 2 locations	\$10,000	
Renovation of space	Estimated and must be approved by landlords	\$190,000	
	Total	\$1,797,579	\$443,101

¹Staff costs includes salary, OPERS, Medicare and health insurance

²Assumes 4% increase in staff costs