

Testimony on HB 1
FAIR SCHOOL FUNDING
Before the House Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education
Rep. Tracy M. Richardson, Chair
By Susan Kaeser, LWV Ohio Specialist
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Chairwoman Richardson, Ranking Member Troy, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share this testimony. My name is Susan Kaeser. I am the education specialist for the League of Women Voters of Ohio. For more than 40 years I have advocated for the success of our public schools as a community volunteer, and as the director of two different nonprofit organizations that focused on strengthening and mobilizing public commitment to public education.

Much of my resolve is informed by 35 years as a classroom volunteer at Boulevard Elementary School in Cleveland Heights. For the last decade I've helped kindergartners learn their letters and letter sounds. Most of my students start school knowing less than a handful of letters and little knowledge of the sound that goes with them. For some students it only takes a few weeks, for others it is a few months, but like sponges, they absorb the building blocks for learning to read. Our children deserve a robust education and an equal chance to benefit from the life altering experience of a public education.

Democracy and education go hand in hand. State responsibility to provide for a system of common schools is built into the Ohio Constitution because education is fundamental to self-governance. LWVO supports HB 1 because it makes our funding system fair to children, communities, and taxpayers, and it fulfills the legislature's obligation to provide for a system of common schools.

We are grateful to former Rep. Patterson and Speaker Cupp for shepherding the development of this plan, and to Reps. Callender and Sweeney for sustaining momentum to make Ohio a place where school funding is fair.

The state investment in public education is designed to ensure that every child has access to a public school that has adequate resources to provide a high quality education, regardless of the capacity of their local community to fund that education. This is truly democratic and is the key to the strength of our education system. And this plan achieves this outcome.

One critical feature of the plan that is especially significant to my community and other school districts where the majority of students are poor, is direct funding of vouchers and charter schools. Deduction funding upends the equalizing function of state aid. It takes state basic aid appropriated for public school students, and uses it to fund students who live in that school district but don't attend its' schools. Public school kids get what is left after the charter and voucher bills are paid. To fill the funding void, local communities are left with two unacceptable options: cut programs or raise local taxes. Some do

both. By taking away essential state aid, deduction funding undercuts quality, and it creates unnecessary tension within communities as they are forced to fill the funding void by raising local taxes or offering students less. Deduction funding allows a new education expense, but shifts the cost to communities. State lawmakers are spared the need to raise taxes and can appear to be fiscal conservatives, but are in fact responsible for increases in local taxes which are less equitable.

Direct funding is the key to serving choice without fueling inequality.

Given 610 school districts and more than 1.7 million children, one size does not fit all. Addressing this diversity and creating a coherent plan that benefits every community is a tall order. HB 1 is sensitive to that variation and meets the challenge of fairness. Building the base cost on the actual cost of education, factoring in both property wealth and income to the assessment of local capacity to fund the base cost, increasing the investment in children who live in poverty, and taking on more of the cost of transportation are key features to making the system fair.

As you are well aware, the need for a legislative remedy is urgent. School funding is in tatters and school districts- large and small, urban, suburban and rural - have reached a breaking point. HB 1, is a magnificent long-awaited solution that puts our public system of education on solid footing, and makes the system fair to the diverse communities within our state.

There is unequivocal recognition that the architects of the plan did their homework, took into account the factors that are critical to establishing both the level of investment that is needed and the division of responsibility for paying for it. It would be a disservice to the residents of the state to squander the outcome of this process, and postpone enactment of this plan.

LWVO has advocated for constitutional school funding since the 1997 *DeRolph* decision. There is finally light at the end of the tunnel. Please don't let it fade.

The LWVO bases its support for legislation on positions approved by all members. This legislation is in line with multiple positions.

1. Funding of public education is a shared responsibility of state government and local school districts.
2. The distribution formula should compensate for variations among school districts in their local ability to raise local revenue, and should be calculated to reflect income wealth of school districts, not just property wealth.
3. State aid should be based on the actual cost of mandated programs and meeting the educational needs of the children within a district.
4. Public funds should only be used for public schools that are accountable to locally elected boards of education.
5. This plan meets the requirements from the DeRolph case that we secure a constitutional system of funding.

Public education is part of the critical infrastructure of our state and every community. It is worthy of the investment of our public funds. We urge you to support HB 1 as introduced, and to advocate for its adoption in time to guide education funding in the next biennium.