

Testimony on HB110 (Appropriations for FY 2022-23 Budget)
Submitted to the Ohio Senate Finance Committee,
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by Jeff Donnelly, Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44118

Chairman Dolan and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify about why I support the Fair School Funding Plan in HB110.

I am a carpenter and business owner in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. Two generations of my wife's family own homes in Cleveland Heights and a small farm in Holmes County. I love my community in Cleveland Heights. I love the community in Holmes County. These are two distinct places in Ohio with which I am comfortable stating that I am familiar. They are very different. People in both places often have differing views about the way to live their life, who to vote for, how to raise their kids. With all of these differences, once you are among the community as a homeowner, regular at a local restaurant, brew house or, in my case, local hardware store, there is a sense that this community would protect and defend your right to do things as you see fit. Sometimes this is enlightened self-interest, if only as a statement of their own sense of freedom and independence that relies on the good intentions of neighbors. This may be a romantic notion, but wait for the first tornado, power outage or family crisis and you won't be surprised by the visit from the next-door neighbor or a consoling comment from a store owner that is familiar with you. It is not as common everywhere as you may think. I didn't grow up in Ohio and I think that makes me particularly attuned to this feature of Ohio that many Ohioans take for granted.

Where my children are going to school in Cleveland Heights seems to lurch from crisis to crisis when it comes to funding. Having grown up in a small town in California, I am not used to so many parents being involved and concerned about the schools. I spent a lot of time in college and life catching up for the deficiencies in my schools as a result of that disregard. In Cleveland Heights, however, people give a damn. A great big damn. They know that school is about a lot more than Friday night football, although that is outstanding. They know that it is about success for their children, for their businesses, for their security, for their elders, their faith. Threats to the schools are felt like the microburst that struck our community a year ago when the fragility of our tree-lined streets and pretty houses became very clear in the face of enormous natural forces. It was easy to come together in a circumstance like a natural disaster. There is a clear 'other' to blame.

When there are cuts to schools, the blame is not so easy to pinpoint accurately.

Right now, Cleveland Heights is on the verge of a blame game. Blaming those that would take advantage of a system that gives local public money to private, religious schools at the direct expense of students and families that are not of that faith or have a desire to separate from the public schools. These families that would even move to our city to raise their children by sometimes strict religious dictates couldn't necessarily be faulted for finding a loophole in a public education scheme that features an end run around funding that doesn't even require an

attempt to work within the public school system. We who have families in Cleveland Heights celebrate our diversity and even say "All are Welcome" in our literature and we mean it. However, this school funding issue threatens to pit those who would be free to raise their children by a certain set of beliefs with those who do not believe that their tax money should be redirected because of an unconstitutional scheme from Columbus. Our community is at severe risk of falling into resentful camps that see each other as a threat in this scenario. If that is what our state government intends, then I would point out that anywhere in the world where sectarian conflict pervades, all lose. If this situation persists, then we will be spending time healing divisions based on things like religion in no less a way that we now spend so much of our resources on healing divisions based on race and poverty. In the meantime, the death of a school program, of any size, in our public schools cannot be revived at the flick of a switch.

My children are privileged to grow up in Ohio, privileged to grow up in Cleveland Heights and Holmes County, privileged to have urban and agrarian culture, science, math, theatre, music, sports and safe, well-stocked and well-staffed facilities. All of these are paid for by the community and are all are welcome to these resources. Without debating the merits of conflating choice with state support of religion, I would suggest that if the state would like to offer funding for an alternative to the institution of public schools, please feel free to work to fund it from the state. I accept that when I pay my state taxes, I could be helping families and cities with which I have no familiarity or association. However, I share that financial burden with a population several factors larger than my school district. I celebrate that widely distributed expense every time I ride my bike on the Holmes County trail and see Amish families picnicking in the shade.

When my neighbor in Holmes county wants to have his cows graze on my land, he doesn't just move his fence posts when I am not looking, not because he can't, but because he knows that any short-term gain he might get from such an act defeats the benefits of our long-term relationship as neighbors.

Please move the fence posts back. We are looking.

-Jeff Donnelly