

Ohio House Finance Committee
Substitute House Bill 305
Proponent Testimony
James Witt, Superintendent, Lake Local School District
November 17, 2020

Co-chairmen Oelslager and Callender, Vice Chairman Scherer, Ranking Member Cera, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of substitute House Bill (HB) 305, the Fair School Funding Plan. Today, I am proud to represent not only Lake Local Schools, where I have served as superintendent for 14 years, but also 104 school district leaders, including superintendents, treasurers/CFOs and other school district officials in Northwest Ohio, who have signed on in support of this testimony. You can view the full list of those who support this testimony at the end of this document.

Life is not fair. I have used this phrase repeatedly over the years with my sons who are now 27, 24, and 22. At times I have followed it up with, "If life was fair there would be no wheelchairs." As I prepared my remarks for today and studied the data proposed in Senate Bill 376, I have grown more confident that there might be a day when I can tell my sons that although not all things in life are fair, things can change. At least school funding in Ohio finally has a chance to be something that is actually fair and equitable to all.

The state constitution tells us that school funding is the responsibility of the state government and the local community. No one disputes that important article. I believe I can speak on behalf of Ohio school leaders, board members, and taxpayers when I say that the increasingly heavy burden placed on the local entity has been increasingly difficult on our school systems. In the Lake Local School District, our property taxes have increased 82% since the early 2000s and our local share to the general fund has increased by 10%. During that same time frame, state aid has increased by a cumulative 4.8%.

I suppose in some districts, those disproportionate numbers would not register much of a hit to the school district. In our district, it is huge. Since 1963 voters have approved less than 23% of new operating levies and we went through a stretch where we failed 12 in a row. The anguish, hostility and negativity this type of voting history places on a community is not something I would wish on anyone. At our lowest point, the state threatened to take our district over and we had board members and administrators who were willing to drive the keys to our buildings to Columbus. It was that bad.

We have righted the ship as best we can. We have a beautiful campus, we have some growing business, and I cautiously state that things are going pretty well for us. However, not a day goes by nor has a day ever gone by in my almost 15 years as the superintendent where I have not looked for a way to save money.

Before I go on, let me be very transparent. I am not a mathematician. I am not a financial guru. And I am not a politician. I am an educator. Over the past 30 years, I think I have developed a grasp of what helps kids and what makes schools successful. When I look at the bedrocks of The Fair School Funding Plan, it pleases me to see that the formula is built around what is best for the student. Taking it one step further, this funding plan considers the “whole” student with a road map that leads to future success. As an educator, that basis gives me incredible hope and makes me excited for all of Ohio’s students. The other component of The Fair School Funding Plan that is so groundbreaking and promising is the fairness for each district. This plan takes into account the capacity of each community and uses that as one of the multipliers. The consideration of the uniqueness of each community is the fairest part of the bill. No longer will a place like Lake, with a free and reduced population of 46-48%, be compared to a school like Ottawa Hills or Perrysburg. Our community and our district will be funded on our own capacity to pay our fair share. The key word here is 'fair'.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to me today. I appreciate the efforts you are putting forth to make an informed decision on the future of school funding for our students and future students.

Northwest Ohio School District Leaders in Support of This Testimony

Craig Kupferberg, Superintendent, Allen County Educational Service Center

Karla Wireman, Treasurer, Allen County Educational Service Center

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Keith Horner, Superintendent, Apollo Career Center

Angie Spridgeon, Treasurer/CFO, Arcadia Local Schools

Shawn Brown, Superintendent, Auglaize County ESC

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