



May 31, 2023

Senate Finance Committee

Testimony on HB 33

Presented by Melissa Cropper, President of Ohio Federation of Teachers

Chair Dolan, Vice-Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, I am Melissa Cropper, President of the Ohio Federation of Teachers (OFT). OFT represents teachers in traditional and charter schools, support staff, higher education faculty and staff, social workers, library employees, and other public employees across the state of Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to testify about HB 33.

Fair School Funding Plan

This biennial budget presents an opportunity to make good on Ohio's constitutional obligation to fully and fairly fund our public schools. I want to praise and thank the House for renewing their commitment to the Fair School Funding Plan and using this biennial budget to enact years three and four of the planned six-year phase in period.

The House listened to public school districts, teachers, and parents, and improved the funding formula by updating the cost inputs so that funding is based on the actual costs of educating Ohio's children in 2023, not based on pre-inflation cost data from 2018. Equally important, the House also updated the additional costs needed for educating students with disabilities and students who are learning English as a second language, and set up a study to determine the additional costs needed for educating economically disadvantaged students.

These are all important steps that have broad bipartisan support in Ohio's statehouse and in Ohio's schoolhouses. We hope that you join your House colleagues in support.

End of Mandatory Retention for Third Grade Reading Guarantee

We also appreciate that the House listened to educators, school counselors, and parents, and eliminated mandatory retention based on third grade reading tests. Every student is different, but the mandatory retention policy forced a one size fits all solution to a complex problem. For some students, retention might be needed to advance their reading skills, but for other students, the negative impacts may outweigh the positive aspects. Removing mandatory retention will let educators, in consultation with parents and guardians, make the best choices for individual students. We urge you to include this policy change in the Senate's budget legislation.

Radical Expansion of Private School Vouchers

While there is much in the House's budget that we support, we do have serious concerns about the radical expansion of private school vouchers. Studies have shown that Ohio students who receive EdChoice vouchers do not have better education outcomes than their peers in public schools. Yet in recent years as evidence grows that private school vouchers are ineffective, the eligibility requirements have been expanded multiple times, creating a much more costly system of funneling of public dollars to unaccountable private institutions.

This expansion has been great for private schools, but it has been an obstacle toward the full and fair funding of Ohio's public schools, which 90% of Ohio students attend. As teachers, parents, taxpayers, and community members, we have a moral imperative to do everything possible to ensure that our public schools are fully funded before additional funds are diverted to unaccountable private schools. As legislators, you have a constitutional responsibility to do the same.

In its current version, HB 33 would nearly double the family income eligibility threshold to qualify for an income-based EdChoice scholarship, raising it from 250% of the federal poverty level to 450% (\$135,000 for a family of four) beginning in 2024. When we compare the income thresholds for private school vouchers with the income thresholds for other, more essential services, we see how out-of-step this policy proposal is.

- In order to qualify for food assistance under the WIC program, a family in Ohio must earn less than 185% of the poverty level.
- To qualify for publicly funded child care they must earn less than 142% of the poverty level (Governor DeWine's budget proposal increases this to 160%).
- To qualify for pre-K / early education funds, they must earn less than 200% of the poverty level.
- To qualify for Medicaid, they must earn less 156% of poverty level or for CHIP, 206% of poverty level
- And to qualify for Ohio Works First, the financial assistance portion of the state's TANF program, a family must earn less than 50% of the poverty level.

Investing in these items – food assistance, child care, pre-K/early childhood education, and direct cash assistance – will do much more to reduce poverty and improve educational outcomes for Ohio's kids than this reckless expansion of private school vouchers. Attending pre-K gives children a strong foundation that elementary school teachers can build on, allowing students to thrive early in school and develop confidence and a love for learning. Likewise, kids who go to school hungry, or while experiencing housing instability, or when experiencing poor health (whether it be a temporary illness or chronic conditions like asthma, poor vision, hearing issues, etc) do not perform at their best. As legislators, you have the ability to make a positive impact on all of these issues, if there is enough political will.

Assistance for private school is not a greater need for families than essentials like food, health, childcare, pre-K, and direct cash assistance. If low-income families had as much lobbying capacity as private school supporters do, perhaps there would be less of a discrepancy in eligibility for these programs. Why on earth would this state consider funding vouchers at the 450% of poverty level under the guise of creating better

education opportunities when basic needs that directly impact a child's ability to learn have not been adequately met and are not funded at even close to that same level.

Avoid Complex Policy Changes in Budget Legislation

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge that there is currently proposed legislation that would dramatically reshape public education (SB1/HB12), impose a new structure of restrictions and regulations for Ohio's public institutions of higher education (SB83/HB151), and create a universal voucher system that would cost the state at least \$1 billion (SB11/HB11). These are all incredibly big changes that will have huge ripple effects through our educational system. Public testimony on these bills have shown how divisive parts of these issues are and how many concerns Ohioans have. We urge you to allow these issues to continue to be discussed, debated, amended, and voted on through the normal legislative process. Attaching any one of these issues to a biennial budget would eliminate the public's ability to continue to provide input on these bills and would deprive you and your colleagues of the expertise of education stakeholders, like students, parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators.

This concludes my testimony and I welcome any questions.