

## Senate Testimony – Spring 2021

Chairman Brenner, Vice chair Blessing, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony about the Fair School Funding Plan in HB110.

My name is Susie Kaeser and I am a volunteer member of the LWVO lobby corps. I live in Cleveland Heights and have been a public education advocate for nearly four decades. I became a classroom volunteer at Boulevard Elementary School on my daughter's first day of kindergarten in 1988, and have returned every year until this year when the pandemic shut down the school. It is this intimate connection to the children, teachers and school leaders in my community that informs my respect for the teaching profession, and makes me a fierce advocate for quality public education – and the Fair School Funding plan.

Public schools are human intense communities. Quality is hard to guarantee. And it can't be achieved by remote control, by prescriptive directives, or by using flawed measurement tools, legal mandates or punishment. That is why much of my career has focused on how the residents of a community can help schools operate in ways that are respectful of all, and release the capacity of every student, teacher, leader and parent to be their best and do their best every day. Perfection is not possible. But making schools great places is everyone's business and we can all help set this expectation, provide the encouragement and concern needed to achieve it most of the time, and contribute the resources needed to offer a robust educational experience.

Our system of public education is a profound expression of our best values as a society and as a democracy. They deserve the investment of our time and public resources.

Two basic principles of the LWV are that "every citizen should be protected in the right to vote; that every person should have access to free public education that provides equal opportunity for all." These core principles are connected. Both are dimensions of equal citizenship.

Equal opportunity is paramount to a successful public system, and the state's investment in this enterprise is essential to achieving both quality and equality. That is why we participated in the *DeRolph* litigation, and that is why we support the Fair School Funding plan as designed.

It is hard to imagine where we would be as a society or a democracy if the founding fathers had not understood how important education is to the ability of citizens to both protect their rights and to participate fully in self-governance. They understood, perhaps better than we do today, the importance of the equal status of every individual. And they understood that equal access to education where the diverse residents of each community come together to learn- is a powerful way to advance our democratic ideals.

Constitutional scholar Derek Black notes that when education became etched into the Northwest Ordinance our founders communicated that making education a private choice and individual responsibility would only encourage division, and unequal access to this critical ingredient for equal citizenship. Developing an educated citizenry needed the security and equality of access that only a publicly funded and operated system could provide. This is a constitutional guarantee in every state, and is more than 200 years old in Ohio. You are the guardians of this legacy.

Your decision about whether or not you choose to fund a high-quality system of public schools is a values choice. Are you committed to the equal value of every resident of our state? Do you support the

Ohio Constitution and the operating principle that education is a civic resource not a consumer choice? When you use public funds for parallel systems operated with different rules, you weaken the public system and its civic benefits.

Public education must be made equally available because our common interest resides in an educated citizenry. While many of you are drawn to the idea of choice in education and a better fit for a student – this option has always been available. But when offered at public expense, it is a short-sighted luxury that subverts a bigger purpose. As long as our state operates with a financial scarcity mentality and is driven by a desire to reduce taxes and shrink the use of public resources to enhance life in our state, it is absolutely essential that the first priority for allocating education funds is to make our public system strong. It serves 90% of our students, is the cornerstone of community life in so many towns and neighborhoods, and is the foundation for democratic governance.

Our public schools are an asset for education, community cohesion, viable neighborhoods, and democracy. This is the moment to put the public system first, not last when thinking about advancing an educated citizenry.

This is a critical moment in Ohio's history. After a relentless assault on the reputation of our system of public education, years of flat funding of the public schools and extravagant funding of nonpublic and often for-profit education providers, many districts are on the verge of financial collapse. Local communities, often those with the least capacity to pay more local taxes, have taken up the slack left by the legislature's indifference putting new stresses on the will of local tax payers to fund their schools. This dynamic has put the wonderful partnership between state and local funding sources at risk and with it, the ability to provide the kind of education we need for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We can't even keep even. How can we excel?

We are falling short when it comes to providing a high quality education for every child regardless of their unique needs or the ability of their community to pay for that education. Inequality is growing. A seemingly indestructible pillar of every community now feels fragile. If we care about our collective future, and where we will be a generation from now, we need to fortify our public system with the resources and respect that it needs to serve all – because we all benefit when our public system succeeds.

So what do we care about? Do we want to advance our democracy and equal citizenship? What is more important: a strong public system or advancing individual rights in a way that simply undermines the capacity of our public system to serve everyone.

We are fortunate to have a real plan that can strengthen our public system and lighten the load on local communities. When it comes to Ohio's 609 school districts and more than 1.5 million students, one size does not fit all. The school funding challenge is to develop a system that is responsive to both the diversity of school districts and the diverse needs of the students they serve. This is a lot to accommodate in one plan. But the careful process full of corrections and improvements, that formulated the Fair School Funding plan has produced something that the LWVO urges you to support because it advances fairness and benefits all of us. It is what our democracy requires.

Susan Kaeser