

**Testimony on HB110 (Appropriations for FY 2022-23 Budget)**  
**Submitted to the Ohio Senate Primary & Secondary Education Committee,**  
**May 5, 2021**

by Toni K. Thayer, Cleveland Heights, OH 44121

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 in favor of the Fair School Funding Plan in HB110.

I am a 26-year resident of Cleveland Heights. I am here today as an active volunteer with the Heights Coalition for Public Education and with Tiger Nation for Strong Schools, our local levy committee. I am also here as the proud mother of two Cleveland Heights High School students, who have been students in the district since first grade.

It is from the point of view of my children and their peers that I first want to appeal to you. My children are proud to be Heights Tigers. They love their schools and they love our community, for its rich commitment to diversity, education, and the arts. But they have watched over the course of their time in public school the effects of a broken school funding system that has only gotten worse as the charter school movement and the EdChoice voucher program have diverted public funds away from public schools. They have seen their class sizes increase and their curricular options decrease. They have said goodbye to beloved and highly qualified teachers who were downsized for budgetary reasons. Even more painful than all of that, they have watched as our community has been turned against itself over school funding.

Our district relies heavily on residential property taxes for local school funding because, as a tightly packed inner-ring suburb, we have little commercial tax base. The heavy burden on homeowners and the need for frequent levies to make up for gaps in funding from the state have pushed us to the breaking point. The rhetoric has become ugly, and even supporters of the public schools take pause before voting for a levy because they see their taxes being diverted to vouchers.

My children, and the other children in our community, are watching and listening, and it hurts them to know that their education, their futures are such a contentious issue.

I've been volunteering in the schools and for the schools for 11 years. Last year, I volunteered on back-to-back levies, one in the Primary Election that lost by 700 votes and one in the General that won by 135 votes, a mere 0.46% of votes cast. Our committee raised nearly \$120,000. We spent countless hours, we engaged hundreds if not thousands of volunteers. In the fall I personally spent scores of hours running social media, engaging directly with voters.

We did great work on behalf of our schools, but for what? If the current funding model holds, our recent levy is only a stop gap. Without a change, our schools -- which despite everything are still the beating heart of our community -- cannot survive in any form that would be right.

All of this seems like a waste to me ... a waste of money and work, of energy and ideas. Imagine what we could accomplish in our schools if we spent that money, time, energy, and passion working with our students instead? What if the dozens of committee chairs -- like me -- who came up with creative ways to connect with voters during a pandemic instead came up with creative ways to connect with students during a pandemic?

Instead, we are forced to engage in brutal and costly levy battles every few years just to secure the most basic funding necessary to educate our children. We're forced to do this by a funding system that is inherently broken. It is unconstitutional, unsustainable and unfair. Our schools, which are far from "failing," are forced to give away nearly 45% of the dollars we receive from the State of Ohio to EdChoice vouchers through deduction funding.

Our schools are not failing. My children and their peers are not failing. The State of Ohio is failing them.

My son, Orson, who is 15, very observant, and poised to take his AP US History exam tomorrow morning said to me recently in a discussion about this very topic, "My generation is being robbed. This money is being sent out of the district. It's going to people who don't even go here!"

My daughter, Zelda, will be attending Ohio University this fall as a prestigious Cutler Scholar. She posed for announcement photos in front of the college gate inscribed with words from the Northwest Ordinance about the importance of education to good government and the happiness of mankind. Those very words are echoed in our state constitution, and it charges our legislators with a primary duty to "secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools throughout the state."

Yet our state has been found wanting in this constitutional obligation several times. And with the advent of deduction funding, it has only strayed further. So, here we are.

The Fair School Funding Plan, inscribed in HB 110, goes a long way to fixing these problems. It was developed over several years by a bipartisan group of experts and stakeholders. Last session it was passed overwhelmingly by your colleagues in the House as a standalone bill, because they know it is what their constituents want.

Funding public education fairly is one of your primary constitutional responsibilities. You have the opportunity right now, at long last, to fulfill that responsibility. As Dr King said, "The time is always right to do what is right."

Thank you.