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Testimony
Senate Finance Committee
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Presented by Peter Petto, LWVO Education Committee Member
312 Breezewood Drive, Bay Village

Chairman Dolan, Vice-Chairman Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, my name is Peter Petto and I am grateful for this opportunity to share some thinking with the committee about budgeting for public schools, and the phasing-in of the Fair School Funding Plan.

I live in Bay Village and am a double retiree. For fifteen recent years, I taught high school math and statistics. And for more than thirty years before that I helped to manage and operate an aluminum foundry that employed hundreds. In these careers I have been both a producer and consumer of educated Ohioans. I continue to work on mathematical games to intrigue students of all ages who believe they are “not a math-person,” to discover that yes they are. And games that are playgrounds for anyone who wants to be a lifelong amateur mathematician. Education is important to our livelihood, and it’s more. Education adds enjoyment and depth to our lives. One thing I loved about working at a public school was knowing that it was accessible and welcoming to all. And an important reason that I valued employees that came from public schools, was their comfort with all the different workers at our factory, and the sense of responsibility and cooperative skills they had developed. I am speaking to you today as a member of the League of Women Voters of Ohio’s Education Committee.

The budget you are constructing will have a huge impact on the education offered to our children. Since 1935, the League has advocated for state investment in public education using a method that guarantees high quality public schools everywhere — accurately and completely recognizing each community’s capacity to be a supportive partner. We expect our lawmakers to follow the state Constitution which calls for, “a thorough and efficient system of common schools.”

Today we’d like to encourage you to do three things as you finalize our next budget.

First, please invest in Ohio’s future by making public education the top priority in the competition for public funds going to education. There are other recipients of public fund in the budget including the EdChoice scholarship program, and money for charter schools. And there are recipients of public funds that don’t appear in the budget at all, for example the beneficiaries of tax credits that reduce Ohio’s revenues. If the Fair School Funding Plan, begun two years ago, is not fully funded, these interests can be correctly seen as competing. And it is an unfair competition. Large sections of our state, more than 46 counties, rely almost exclusively on public schools for K-12 education. Little or no choice is possible there. And in these counties, the public school is so much more than just a place to educate children. Think about football and basketball games, concerts and plays, all the many things that help make school a center of the community. Schools serve as a primary place to supports families and children, and often are the largest employer. The taxpayers in rural counties are frequently the least able to adequately fund

their schools. Schools are not just education; they are a source of unity and connection; which is also true in suburban and urban areas.

Second, please use the Fair School Funding formulas as the basis for distributing state resources. It has been decades since overreliance on property taxes was found to be unconstitutional. Six years ago Republicans and Democrats came together, and their hard work culminated in the adoption of the structure of the Fair School Funding Plan to calculate support of local schools which is in use now. The plan and its calculation rules replace the patchwork of funding scattered across the budget that has been unpredictable, difficult to comprehend, and often unfair. A large consensus of school superintendents and treasurers coming from every sort of school district and every corner of the state support the plan. That's no surprise. They built it, and they continue to back it. It represents broad agreement between political parties and among urban, suburban, and rural educators. The plan is clear, rational, evidence-based, and transparent. It shifts focus from the needs of a so-called "typical" child to **every** child. It guarantees quality education to those with physical, mental, and emotional needs, those who are high achievers or possess special talents, and those who are from lower socio-economic households. Continuing to follow the plan's formulas will give all of Ohio's children the opportunity to lead successful, productive, joyous lives.

Third, please treat local taxpayers fairly by using current cost data. The formulas we are using now from the last budget were based on cost data that was accurate as possible at that time. These are no longer accurate; inflation has occurred since then. The house budget that follows the Fair School Funding Plan uses the most recent data, preserving the structure and integrity of the plan going forward. Failing to update the cost data will result in a freezing of support to schools. It is often argued that one goal of the legislature is to control expenditures to control or reduce taxes. But taxes aren't really controlled when the state shifts responsibility to pay for necessities to local governments. If outdated, now false basis numbers are used as school costs — this will create immediate pressure to raise local property taxes — making this a shell game. It would be an attempt to deceive everyone in a doubly unfair game where needier districts are likely to be unable to fill the gap. Public school funding is a state and local partnership. Putting more pressure on locally-voted property taxes is unjust and can punish our poorest urban and rural communities, where taxpayers can't always be expected to fill the funding gap created when the state does not hold up its part of the deal.

This budget cycle is the moment when even-handed sufficient school funding can become a reality in Ohio. Taking these three steps will be wonderful for our youth, our state, and all our futures. Please completely implement all the policies that comprise the next phase of the Fair School Funding Plan.