



**Interested Party Testimony on House Bill 110 - Operating Budget
Senate Finance Committee
Susan Kaeser – Education Specialist, LWV Ohio
May 17, 2021**

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chairman Gaverone, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony about the Fair School Funding Plan included 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. My career in two different nonprofit organizations that focused on public education, has always focused on the importance of citizens as guardians of successful public schools. That drew me to the LWVO, a citizen voice for democracy.

It also led me to weekly visits as a classroom volunteer at Boulevard Elementary School following my daughter's first day of kindergarten in 1988. I have returned every year until this year. 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.

Our system of public education is a profound expression of our best values as a society and as a democracy. Public schools – free and open to all - 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.

It is hard to imagine where we would be as a society or a democracy if the founding fathers had not focused on the equal value of every citizen, and recognized that education is essential to the ability of citizens to both protect their rights and to participate fully in self-governance. Education is so important that operating and funding a system of public education where the diverse residents of each community come together to learn, was a requirement of the Northwest Ordinance and part of every state's constitution.

Constitutional scholar Derek Black notes that our founders were concerned 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. We are relying on you to affirm your commitment to the Ohio Constitution, the need for a high quality public school system where both public funding and meaningful oversight provide a high standard of service, and that you embrace the operating principle that education is a civic resource not a consumer choice.

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. When you use public funds for parallel systems operated with different rules, you are not upholding the Constitution. This choice weakens the public system and erodes its civic benefits.

As long as our state lawmakers operate with a financial scarcity mentality and are 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.

This is the moment to put the public system first, not last when thinking about advancing an educated citizenry.

After a relentless assault on the reputation of our system of public education, two decades of mismeasurement of quality, three years of flat funding of the public schools and exponential increases in spending on 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 21st century. We can't even keep even. How can we excel?

We are falling short when it comes to providing the resources needed for our public education system to offer 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.

You have the opportunity to advance our democracy and equal citizenship. We urge you to make our public schools a priority, as required by the Constitution. The Fair School Funding plan is focused on how to invest in our public system so that it is adequate and equitable. This is the moment to put the public system first, and preserve the capacity of our public system to serve everyone.

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.

The League of Women Voters of Ohio was formed in May 1920 out of Ohio's woman suffrage movement. The League is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy. The League has over 4000 members and 32 local Leagues across the Buckeye State.

