

**A perspective on school funding relative to HB96 by Susan Kaeser on behalf of the League of Women Voters of Ohio.**

Susan Kaeser has been an avid public common school advocate for several decades. Her perspective is derived from years of advocacy and not as a public school employee. She is an avid researcher.

Attached is her March 3 testimony to the House Education Committee.

Interested Party Testimony – HB 96

House Education Committee

March 3, 2025

Presented by Susan Kaeser, LWVO Issue Specialist

1554 Compton Road, Cleveland Heights

Chairman Fowler Arthur, Vice Chairman Odioso, Ranking Member Robinson, my name is Susie Kaeser and I appreciate the opportunity to share on behalf of the LWVO, my thoughts about public education funding in HB 96.

I live in Cleveland Heights. This first ring suburb of Cleveland was incorporated as a village in 1902 and one of the first actions taken by the 1,500 residents was to fund the construction of a public school – a reflection of our country’s historic appreciation of the value of education to individuals, to democratic self-rule, to a healthy community, and to the economy of a developed country.

I am proud of our public schools and I’m grateful to our educators, their earnest effort to serve every one of the unique children who comes through the door, and their respect for children of all abilities, incomes, racial and ethnic background, primary language, personality, and degrees of motivation and family support. Public schools add value to my community an interesting and wonderful place to live.

Generations later, there is still a public school on that site – the third building – the school my children attended in the 1980s and where for 35 years I have made weekly visits as a classroom volunteer. This deep-rooted pillar of my community and the children who attend school there need your support. They need you to make them your priority as you establish the state budget.

I’ve participated in at least 30 levy campaigns since I bought my house in 1981. Our taxpayers have been generous with our schools. But we need relief too. The partnership between local taxpayers and state lawmakers is out of balance and could easily collapse without the state contributing more toward the success of this important enterprise that serves all of us.

Public funds are invested in our public system because our shared self- interest is served when every child, family, neighborhood and community has a public school that has the capacity to serve them. That capacity depends in large part on your willingness to fund them adequately and equitably.

Ohio families have multiple legal options for educating their children which is appropriate in a pluralistic society. Those options accommodate the individual preferences and religious priorities of a diverse population. They include:

- Nonsectarian public schools in 609 school districts in 88 counties.
- 15 statewide on-line charter schools.
- 338 local charter schools in 39 counties.

- 717 private schools in 77 counties.
- Homeschooling in 367 non-chartered nonpublic schools in 61 counties.
- Homeschooling by parents.

Public schools recognize the separation of church and state and are funded by the public because they serve the common good. They are stable, transparent, accountable, professional, and operate under strict standards to protect taxpayers and students. They welcome everyone. These qualities are unique to public schools.

Until recently public funds were reserved for public schools, and families accepted responsibility for funding their personal preferences outside the option available to them at public expense. Over the last two decades lawmakers have seen fit to shift that responsibility to the public but have not fulfilled their historic commitment and legal obligation to adequately fund the public system that we all own. We have two different kinds of publicly funded education providers. It's problematic and puts at risk a strong public system.

In 2021 the state budget put state resources for public schools, private school tuition vouchers, and charter school tuition in the same line item. While profoundly different, they now compete for students at the community level and funds in this state budget.

K-12 is a local activity. In order to better understand the role of public schools, charter schools and private schools as a local choice, I examined enrollment data and the number of schools located in each county found on the ODEW website. I have attached a table that provides that information and a map that shows the reliance on public schools. Each option is unique, and the data shows that so is the relevance of these options to the residents of each county.

1. Public schools are the primary education resources in all 88 counties, serving between 73% and 100% of the students in each county who are funded in the same line item in the budget.
2. Ohio is largely a rural state and rural schools rely on public schools. In 75 Ohio counties between 90% and 100% of students attend a public school. This includes all but 2 of the counties with fewer than 10,000 public school students.
3. Public schools play the biggest role in 47 counties where between 95% and 100% of the students attend a public school. This includes 10 counties where the percentage is 100%
4. Private schools and charter schools are concentrated in just 6 counties and have a significant impact on public school enrollment where the share is the lowest, between 73% and 79%.

As members of this committee, you represent the diversity that I observed about the enrollment in public, private and charter schools in Ohio's 88 counties.

Rep. Jones, Rep. Ritter, Rep. Newman and Rep. Bird, your districts are the epitome of what is typical in 47 rural counties where public education plays the biggest role. Noble, Morgan, Meigs, and Athens counties are among the 10 counties with 100% use of public schools, and Brown, Darke, Harrison and Guernsey counties are among the other 37 counties where between 95% and 99% of students use a public school.

Furthermore, Belmont, Washington, Clermont, and Miami counties are among the 28 counties where the share of public school students is between 90% and 94%. That also includes Sandusky and Seneca counties in district 88 and Ashtabula in district 99..

There are only 13 counties in the state where fewer than 90% of the students attend a public school. Hamilton, Cuyahoga, Lorain and Geauga counties all fall in that low threshold group and are represented on this committee too. Together there are 248 private schools in these four counties almost equal to the 241 schools found in the 75 high public school use counties combined.

The bulk of state funds for charter schools and private schools flows to the 6 urban counties where between 73% and 79% of students attend a public school. Schools located in Lucas, Montgomery, Summit, Hamilton, Franklin and Cuyahoga county educate 39% of the public school students in the state, 67% of the private school students, and 81% of the charter school students. Public schools in these counties pay the price with lost revenue.

Taxpayers in 75 counties, most of the state, are funding nonpublic alternatives that are not available to most of them, and are also carrying much of the burden for funding the schools that they rely on.

It's time for education funding to actually be fair.

A fair system makes adequately funding the public education system the priority in shaping K-12 spending and tax policies in the state budget for the next biennium. That includes:

- using accurate and current cost data to establish the base cost.
- no more delays in appropriating funds that meet the full cost.
- state tax policies that guarantee adequate funds to meet the total cost of the final step.
- constraining unlimited growth in private option spending. The current generosity with tuition levels for charters and vouchers is neither justifiable nor reasonable. It makes these options unsustainable and undermines progress in public school funding. The "me-too" approach that links any increase in state base cost for public schools to an increase in state funding for nonpublic options is especially problematic.

As part of becoming a state Ohio established a system of common schools as the most reliable way to guarantee all children access to a free education, a necessity for self-governance. The distribution of nonpublic schools in Ohio today confirms that they were right. **Public schools are the only education that is universally accessible.**

Despite a focused effort to denigrate public education and make public funds available to nonpublic alternatives, people like their public schools and they use them. They are sources of pride and community. But to achieve all that we expect from them they need you to fund them appropriately.

Generations of Ohio citizens have built a remarkable public education infrastructure that develops individual talents and supports communities and democracy. Ohio lawmakers, have seen fit to create and fund different education opportunities, but this does not reduce in any way, state responsibility to protect generations of public investment in our public schools. It's an amazing system. Allowing it to deteriorate due to disinvestment is unfair, disrespectful, harmful and a waste.

The most effective way to strengthen education in all 88 Ohio counties is to invest in the public schools that welcome all children, are located in every community, serve the public, and create our future.

Please make them your priority.

