

Ohio House Finance Committee
Substitute House Bill 305
Proponent Testimony
Marlon Styles, Superintendent, Middletown City School District
November 17, 2020

Co-chairmen Oelslager and Callender, Vice Chairman Scherer, Ranking Member Cera, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today in support of the Ohio Fair School Funding Plan. My name is Marlon Styles, proud Superintendent of the Middletown City School District. We are an urban school district with a median household income of \$40, 000 and we are 100% Free and Reduced Lunch rate. Our current forecast indicates we will need additional resources as soon as possible or we will face the task of passing a school levy. Considering that the median household income in my district is only \$40, 000, I do not want to have to ask our residents to pay more when I know how much they are struggling, especially in the midst of the pandemic. On 11/16/20, our Board of Education unanimously approved a resolution in support of Sub HB 305. I also present this testimony with the support of 62 school district leaders in Southwest Ohio, including superintendents, treasurers/CFOs and other school district officials, who have signed on to this testimony. You can view the full list of those who support this testimony at the end of this document.

Sub HB 305 transparently answers the question: what does it take to educate a child? For the first time, our high poverty students are going to be able to see how much they are getting to be educated. The plan is equitable. Addressing each district's capacity when looking at their property and income wealth makes logical sense to truly identify a community's ability to pay for the education of its students. And, it's refreshing to see a stable formula that will benefit long-term planning.

I am not here to reiterate the technical information you have already heard. Please refer to the Work Group's testimony for their expert overview. I am here to testify for the students who, year after year, are overlooked and under-supported by our current funding formula. Prior to the current flat funding structure, Middletown CSD was one of the Ohio districts whose funding was capped, and at about 70% or \$14,400,000 short of the formula aid.

The funding structure of public education in Ohio is systemically unjust. According to an analysis by the Alliance for Excellent Education, Black students in Ohio are 8 times more likely to attend an F school than their White peers. Let me tell you the difference between an F school and an A school is not the quality of the students or teachers, it's the resources invested in those students and educators. Many states across this country are taking real action to deliver systemic equity, and I know the leadership in Ohio, at the core, believes in equity for all. The current system is not equitable for Brown, Black, rural, disabled, ESL, and gifted students in this state. As a result, it means the student who dreams of being an engineer arrives at school yearning for access to STEAM opportunities that don't exist. Unfair funding hasn't allowed for investments in STEAM resources, including technology. Dreams are crushed.

It means the district who lacks funds to meet the Gifted Indicator and hire the staff to service the students is frustrated. I won't mention the inequities in the accountability system.

It means the students with disabilities who look to the school district to provide appropriate Least Restrictive Environment, braille readers, and specially designed curriculum are frustrated at the lack of support and programs. It becomes harmful to students.

It means the Black student who shows up to school on a daily mission to find inclusive learning environments remains frustrated. Their daily fatigue of trying to access the learning is evident. The unfairly funded district is unable to seek out culturally relevant practices and to recruit teachers of color. Their education should matter.

It means the Spanish speaking newcomer arrives at school each day frustrated at the lack of opportunities to learn because of the language barrier. Unfair funding has resulted in their district unable to provide adequate ESL supports and programs.

It means the grandmother of six school-aged children has to fight to make her plea heard for her high poverty, unfairly funded, school district to help provide her grandchildren an education that would break the cycle. She is frustrated.

It means the dreams for a better education, a fairer education of countless Ohio students, and students across the country, are deferred and left to wither while educators continue to fight for equitable funding. We are frustrated.

Unfairly funded public school districts face the same question annually. Where can we cut costs? Ohio legislators, if you had to make a decision about what to take away from a student because your district continued to be unfairly funded...What would you take away?

Reduce transportation and require kids to walk?

Cut staff and increase class sizes?

Eliminate sports and extracurricular activities?

Remove School Resource Officers?

Cut electives and fine art programs?

Cut the technology that gives them the ability to access the Internet and learn from home?

Eliminate social emotional resources and support systems?

What if public school districts were fairly funded? Ohio legislators, if you were fairly funded what would you provide students?

Ensure STEAM experiences in every school?

Provide equitably integrated technology?

Increase services for our ESL students?

Provide quality pre-school?

Create after school programs?

Provide access to Social Workers and counselors to support the social emotional needs of your students?

On top of being continually unfairly funded, so many districts in SW Ohio are being crippled by the EdChoice Voucher program. Shame on me if I don't take the time to talk about how this systemically unfair program takes general fund dollars from Ohio's public school districts. Let me be honest, it takes funds from primarily urban districts. 80% of our EdChoice Voucher funds are used to cover the private school tuition costs for white private school students who never step foot in public school systems (232 of Middletown's 290 EdChoice vouchers). In April 2020, MCSD BOE approved \$2 million in reductions because of the financial devastation of EdChoice vouchers. Our current EdChoice voucher deduction is \$1,385,000 and it is estimated to increase by over \$250,000 annually. This is just another systemic equity barrier faced by public school students. Over the past few years, we have been hit hard with EdChoice deductions.

As we return back to fairly funding all public school districts, I draw your attention to 2 options. Action in this moment indicates 1 of 2 things for Ohio public school districts and the students they serve:

- Option 1: Ohio is just fine with the current system that creates opportunity gaps and undervalues low-income students and students of color, or
- Option 2: Ohio recognizes that the success of our state depends on the success of ALL of its students. Therefore, we are going to invest in the success of every child, regardless of socio-economic status, skin color, grasp of the language, and/or ability. Opportunities for all.

We hope the Ohio legislators shift away from merely telling our students they matter, to actually showing them they matter by taking action to pass Sub HB 305. Find the courage. Answer the call. Do it for Ohio's youth. I leave you with this: Ohio needs to be intentionally unequal if it wants school districts to produce similar outcomes. Let's start by being fair. Co-chairmen Oelslager and Callender, ViceChairman Scherer, Ranking Member Cera and members of the House Finance Committee, the best economic stimulus package is a high-quality education. I call on this body to choose option 2. Let's pass the Fair School Funding Plan and provide each of our students the opportunity to thrive. Members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Southwest Ohio School District Leaders in Support of This Testimony

Keith Millard, Superintendent, Batavia Local Schools

Chris Brown, Superintendent, BCESC

Jeff McPherson, Superintendent, Botkins Local Schools

Paul Carpenter, Treasurer/CFO, Butler Tech Career Center

Dan Bassler, Treasurer, Carlisle Local Schools

Jennifer Wagner, Treasurer/CFO, Cincinnati Public Schools

Juliana Wallace, Treasurer, Clark County ESC

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Theresa Noe, Superintendent, Finneytown Local Schools

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Darrell Edwards, Superintendent, Goshen Local Schools

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