



Education

**Testimony on HB 33 before the House Primary and Secondary
Education Subcommittee**

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Chair Richardson, Ranking Member Issacsohn and members of the Primary and Secondary Education subcommittee of the Ohio House:

My name is Tanisha Pruitt, Ph.D and I represent Policy Matters Ohio, a non-partisan, not-for-profit research organization that is building a more vibrant, equitable, sustainable and inclusive Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to testify as an interested party on House Bill 33.

As advocates for sustainable and equitable opportunities for all Ohioans regardless of their zip code or what they look like, we believe that protecting public schools and providing a strong education is the foundation of a functioning democracy.

Based on nationwide Education Week performance rankings, our state currently ranks near the bottom at 46th in equitable distribution of funding. The performance metrics included: (1) state spending by examining per-pupil expenditures adjusted for regional cost differences, the percent of students in districts with per-pupil spending that is at or above U.S. average, spending index, and percent of total taxable resources spent on education and (2) equity, by examining the degree to which education funding is equitably distributed across the districts within the state.

More recently the pandemic has contributed to a statewide decline in test scores and a rise in chronic absenteeism. Additionally, over nearly two decades, we can draw a straight line between the racial and economic achievement gaps and the lack of funding to provide Black, brown, economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities what they need to succeed in school.

How we fund our schools will be the key factor in how well Ohio will be able to educate students for generations to come. The framers of Ohio's constitution required the state to provide a "thorough and efficient system of common schools" for all students. Yet for many years Ohio lawmakers have provided neither sufficient nor fair distribution of state support. Even as policymakers have expected public schools to do more, they have cut state aid to public schools over time, allowing it to be eroded by inflation, diversion of funds to charter schools often run by for-profit entities, and vouchers. We need to protect our public schools.

Since the *Derolph* decision which declared our prior school funding system to be unconstitutional, we have made progress in improving how we fund our schools. In the last budget, lawmakers implemented the Fair School Funding Plan, with the promise to fully and fairly fund schools to give our kids what they need and deserve to thrive. Now we need to finish the job and fulfill that promise. Currently we have secured a formula that addresses the base cost of educating students in the state, but those costs need to be updated to reflect cost estimates for FY 22, rather than those for FY 18, as is currently the case. We have also not done sufficient cost analysis for educating students with additional needs. The Ohio Department of Education has completed studies on the weighted costs of educating English learners and kids with disabilities but there is still a deeper dive that needs to be done. We need to dedicate more funding in the next budget to further analysis of the existing studies, to adequately establish a base cost for educating all students in the state regardless of race, gender identity, ability, or where they live. Without understanding the true full cost of educating all students, it is hard to determine whether lawmakers are adequately and fully funding the formula to meet our kids' needs in schools.

The Fair School Funding Plan has the potential to solve the inequitable and unconstitutional funding structure that we have had to endure. By advancing the FSFP, teachers, parents, students, school boards, administrators, state agencies and lawmakers opened the door to great progress for Ohio's kids and families. But we still don't know whether lawmakers will adequately sustain it in future budgets. In the proposed budget, Governor DeWine has continued the piecemeal approach used in the last budget, phasing in the FSFP for an additional two years instead of fully funding the plan outright, despite having the funding to do so. Lawmakers must commit to full and fair funding right now to sustain our schools and move Ohio to the top of the ranks in educational funding equity in the nation.

Fair funding should not be up for debate. The legislature would best serve the public and our schools by ensuring that we are sufficiently funding the categorical components of the Fair School Funding Plan, so our kids can get the education they deserve, which is guaranteed by Ohio's constitution. We have the money to fully commit to the FSFP in the next budget. Instead of phasing in funding piece by piece, year after year, lawmakers should dedicate the funds needed to fully fund it right now. There's work to be done to make sure lawmakers continue the promise into the next biennium and beyond. Please feel free to contact us with any questions: 614.670.9081.