



House Finance Committee

Co-Chair Rep. Oleslager

Co-Chair Rep. Calendar

Ranking Member Rep. Cera

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Interested Party Testimony

Co-Chair Oleslager, Co-Chair Callender, Ranking Member Cera, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer interested party testimony today. My name is Tracy Nájera, and I am the Executive Director for the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio.

The Children's Defense Fund is a private, nonprofit organization working to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

Nearly 18 months ago, I testified during the biennial budget hearings to this committee on the topic of school funding. I shared that though I supported the significant investments made in student Health & Wellness as part of the education budget, it did not address our state's lack of a rational school funding formula and should not be viewed as a replacement for a sound school funding system. I stand here today very encouraged that a bipartisan, bicameral group of legislators and school district practitioners have worked together over the past five years to develop a school funding plan as represented in HB 305 and SB 376 to achieve consensus.

This is positive news and philosophically there are many bright spots in the Fair School Funding Plan and we no doubt, will need to begin digging into the details of phase-in to ultimately understand how the components will be implemented and for which sectors, school district types, etc. As these details are being deliberated, I would like to make sure there is appreciation for the challenges that children and families are facing in the current pandemic and economic crises Ohio is navigating. In this time, we must be concerned with the wellbeing of all children and focused on the "whole child." The health and wellness funding provided to schools should not be lost in these conversations.

In the past several weeks, I've been reviewing data and research on the impacts that natural disasters have had on children – both educationally and emotionally. There is much we can learn from other experiences, though truly this pandemic is unique in its own rite. In one particular study of 387 children



post-Hurricane Katrina, researcher found that 28% of children observed showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress two to three years after the natural disaster.¹ Another study, which included over 5,700 children found that posttraumatic stress was experienced at greater rates among young children, girls, and children whose families had lost employment, their home, or other forms of stability.² However, research has also shown that children are resilient and at least two out three children will emerge from disasters and traumatic events without lingering in the years after the event or effects later in life. We must make sure that we do much better than that given that we have millions of children who are experiencing this pandemic in a variety of ways and for many their experiences include hunger, threat of homelessness, loss of family income, disconnection from friends, schools, and other caring adults.

Of course, there are very valid concerns that many of our children are losing learning experiences and falling behind. In fact, one local school district this past Spring reported 33% of students as chronically absent once the switch was made to distance learning. This could be for a variety of reasons from lack of bandwidth, device, space to learn, household responsibilities, or a general disinterest in school. We should absolutely be thinking about what we can do to support our teachers and their students to stem this learning loss and help them recover loss ground. We know how to do this.

We must also focus on the mental and behavioral wellbeing of children during this time. For this reason, the health and wellness focus should be preserved – so we can provide for a high quality education system that ensures our children have the knowledge and skills ready to enter military service, higher education, or the workforce and equipped with the emotional and behavioral health and readiness to succeed.

¹ Mindy E. Kronenberg et al., “Children of Katrina: Lessons Learned about Postdisaster Symptoms and Recovery Patterns,” *Child Development* 81 (2010): 1241–59, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01465.x.

² ³⁹ Christopher J. Lonigan et al., “Children Exposed to Disaster: II. Risk Factors for the Development of Post-Traumatic Symptomatology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 33 (1994): 94–105, doi: 10.1097/00004583-199401000-00013.