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**House Primary and Secondary Education Committee  
H.B. 33 - Proponent Testimony**

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Good afternoon, Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on H.B. 33.

My name is Alison Paxson, and I am a Senior Policy Associate for the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio (CDF-Ohio). With more than four decades of advocacy on behalf of Ohio's children, it is the mission of the Children's Defense Fund to champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, and ensure their access to health care, quality education, and nutritional wellness.

Ohio currently ranks [31st](#) in overall child well-being, lagging in the bottom half of all states. One in 6 children in our state experiences poverty, as many as one in four in children in certain counties lives in a household that faces hunger, and far too many children and adolescents across the state of Ohio continue to grapple with unmet basic needs that have caused soaring rates of chronic absenteeism (as high as 65% in the 2020-2021 school year for students experiencing homelessness), dropping proficiency rates in school (especially along striking equity lines depending on what school district or building a child attends), and increasing gaps in an accessible continuum of care for health challenges. Ohio's budget is an opportunity to face these challenges and address the well-being of the whole child with policy and funding decisions in the interests of all children, especially in their access to a high-quality and equitable educational experience.

We commend leadership thus far in Ohio's budget for children and urge Ohio's Senate to consider the following:

**Fair School Funding is the Foundation for Student Success**

All children deserve adequately and equitably funded schools. This is a pressing issue for Ohio and we urge the Ohio Senate to sustain the current version of the budget's commitment to the



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Fair School Funding Plan. This robust school funding plan is widely supported and based on best practices, actual costs, and what's best for a child's educational experience. It is critical that Ohio's budget maintain the increased state dollars to this plan to ensure updated data is used in adequately funding the formula. We urge the Ohio Senate to make sure this funding remains dedicated to this plan and that the nearly \$400 million in state GRF formerly allocated to school police officers remains folded into the formula to not only offset the cost but give schools the opportunity to use an increased share of their funding to address locally determined needs.

We are also pleased that the current version of HB 33 makes the commitment to ensure Ohio conducts an economic disadvantage cost study to determine the true cost of educating children experiencing poverty for the first time in our state history. National [research](#) has shown that students qualifying as economic disadvantage typically require 30% more funding to educate than their peers who are non-disadvantaged. In the last biennium, the economically disadvantaged student aid (referred to now as "disadvantaged pupil impact aid") base amount increased from \$272 to \$422 per pupil. However, the fact remains that the \$272 number is an arbitrary figure, and there is no real basis for what that number represents. Many have determined that in the absence of an actual study conducted to determine the true cost of educating students who qualify as economic disadvantage, this part of the formula and the plan remains incomplete. It is critical that the minimal funding needed to conduct this study remains as part of the final budget to ensure we are supporting all students to be successful.

### **School-Based Care is Critical to a Strong Support System for all Students**

In Ohio, nearly half of all children (48.3%) have health coverage through Medicaid and our state's Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). And in more than 40 school districts in the state, Medicaid and CHIP cover more than 50% of students. Research shows that these children are more likely to attend school regularly, graduate from high school, and complete college than those without health insurance. But to lead healthy lives and thrive, children need access to the care that insurance allows. To ensure that all children can get the care they need, we must provide health services – mental, behavioral, and physical care – and support where children spend most of their time: school.

But for the more than 1.3 million Ohio children enrolled in CHIP who are part of low-income families, parents are often working jobs in which taking time off to bring a child to the doctor means lost wages. Having care in school for these children could be the difference between them being seen by a health care professional or not. Strengthening access to school-based health care also helps in preventing lost learning time for students, can improve school culture and climate as well as community infrastructure by bolstering local school buildings as trusted neighborhood hubs, and is an evidence-based strategy to reducing our state's skyrocketing rates of chronic absenteeism.



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Currently, Ohio's Medicaid in Schools Program (MSP) blends state and federal dollars to pay for physical and mental health services in schools for Medicaid-eligible students – but it is limited to only those students with an individualized education plan (IEP). This means that there are thousands of Medicaid-enrolled students in Ohio whose access to care in-school may be limited because they don't have an IEP and the school isn't able to bill Medicaid for the cost of services. By requiring that students have an IEP to have Medicaid cover their care in school, we are preventing schools from being able to fully serve a large number of low-income students, including providing vital mental and physical health supports.

It is crucial that Ohio's budget maintain its current commitment to join 17 other states – including our neighbors Michigan, Indiana, and Kentucky – in seeking permission from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to reimburse schools for health services provided to any Medicaid-eligible student. This would dramatically increase access to children's health services without additional state investment. For the many Ohio schools already providing school health services, this waiver will allow for federal dollars to cover around two-thirds of their existing costs, allowing for significant expansion of current services that are offered with no additional state general revenue required. We urge leaders to ensure this commitment remains in the final version of the budget directing the Ohio Department of Medicaid to pursue this waiver in a timely manner by the end of 2023.

### **School Meals Support Ohio Student Health and Learning**

School meals are just as important to students' academic success as textbooks. School meals are essential to ensuring that students have access to nutritious food, which has been proven to help children succeed in school. They are linked to better educational outcomes, including increased test scores, improved academic attendance, and increased graduation rates.

The unfortunate reality is that child hunger in Ohio remains unacceptably high. [One in six children, and as many as one in four children in certain counties, lives in a household that faces hunger—that's 413,000 kids across Ohio. Yet more than one in three kids that live in a food insecure household doesn't qualify for school meals.](#)

Ensuring access to school meals for all would address child hunger and food insecurity in our state and further increase future potential, improve student success, and meet the needs of children and working parents. In fact, in a [survey](#) of Ohio parents and caregivers with students in K-12 schools in Ohio: 87% of respondents agreed that school meals should be provided at no cost to all students, regardless of the student's ability to pay. And 82% of Ohio parents and caregivers agreed that school meals are helpful for their families.

As an organization, we are pleased that there is a provision in the budget whereby all students who qualify for reduced-priced meals will now be eligible for free meals (both breakfast and



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lunch). However, universal school meals free of charge for all students - as was the case throughout the pandemic - would eliminate school meal debt, significantly reduce the administrative work required to operate the School Nutrition Programs, improve school nutrition finances, and improve school culture and climate by reducing lunch stigma. This is the long-term solution Ohio needs. As an organization, we hope Ohio's leaders will take heed of positive strides in reducing child hunger through free school meals during the COVID-19 public health crisis and join multiple other states across the nation that have taken action to permanently provide school meals free for all students as part of our biennial budget.

We urge you to consider these critical investments in Ohio's future: our children. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on these critical issues and we look forward to working with you as the biennial budget continues to be deliberated.