

Ohio Redistricting Commission Public Hearing Witness Testimony  
Janice Simmons-Mortimer  
Hiram, Ohio  
August 23, 2021

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you this afternoon. My name is Janice Simmons-Mortimer. I vote in the Ohio 76 District in Hiram Township.

I would like to draw your attention to the issue of keeping communities such as those in Portage County whole so as not to dilute the voice and needs of rural constituencies.

I live in Northern Portage County, which as you know is just west of the Youngstown/Warren area. Portage County has a blend of very rural areas, communities with strong suburban vibe, and college towns. What it does not have is a strong advocate with a clear voice for articulating our community issues. With Portage County divided into two Ohio House districts and three US Congressional districts, the segmentation of voters creates subtle impacts that I feel cause long term harm to our rural communities. Issues such as access to healthcare, adequate funding for important community resources such as libraries, and infrastructure. Today, however, I'd like to focus your attention on the impact it has had on Public Education.

When I compare the Ohio Department of Education's preparedness grades of students in Northern Portage County's rural districts with those of other districts with which our area is currently bound by Ohio District 76, the differences are startling: Less than 50% of students in Northern Portage County's 3 rural districts enter college within 2 years of graduation and under 30% graduate with a college degree after 6 years. One of these school districts in particular, Windham, has less than 20% of students with a college degree after 6 years. This is in comparison to the nearly 73% of students from school systems outside of our county who enter college within 2 years, with a college grad rate over 51%. Kenston Schools, our Geauga County neighbor who shares a border with Crestwood, has over 86% of its students go to college with 68% achieving a degree within 6 years.

With a high school diploma acting as a terminal degree for a significant portion of the Northern Portage County population, and with over 90% of school-aged kids in public schools, the need

for quality Public School Education is paramount for the future viability of our area's workforce, local economy, and overall community's success. Unfortunately, through the cracking of our county voters into small segments at the Congressional level, as well as binding rural districts to our more affluent, suburban neighbors in different counties, the needs of Northern Portage County's rural districts and communities get neglected or overshadowed. Our own vocational school - a pipeline for quality jobs for a significant portion of our students - lies outside both state and federal legislative districts for us, taking away the voice of our community members for whom trade careers are a pathway.

Personally, after moving from Bainbridge into Hiram in 2011, I have spent the last 10 plus years advocating for my home district - from co-leading levy campaigns for much needed buildings and operational funds, to assisting on fundraising for an aquaponics greenhouse for high school students - the district's first new educational space in nearly 20 years. I also coordinated trips for female students to explore STEM careers and a hands-on archeological dig for middle-school aged kids. I have used my skills, time, and money to join with the dedicated teachers and staff of Crestwood to provide quality education for students. I feel thankful that I had the knowledge, means, and ability to do so, since many families in Northern Portage County don't have that opportunity. Still, in those 10 plus years of full-on, active advocacy for my rural district, I can't recall a time when our state or congressional representatives have been available to understand our specific concerns or offer to work with us on true solutions.

While the communities of Crestwood, Garrettsville/Garfield and Windham schools districts have neither the affluence, population or clout that Bainbridge or Chesterland may carry, we do have pride in our area, a desire to help our children attain a life that is better than our own, and a vote. I ask that you please keep our communities tied with those of our neighbors in the rest of Portage County so that we may have the opportunity to join our votes together to ensure that our elected officials clearly see the needs of rural communities and join with us in achieving those goals.

Thank you.