

WITNESS INFORMATION FORM

Please complete the Witness Information Form before testifying:

Date: February 11, 2020

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Are you representing: Yourself Organization

Organization (If Applicable): Heritage Christian School

Position/Title: Superintendent

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Do you wish to be added to the committee notice email distribution list? Yes No

Business before the committee

Legislation (Bill/Resolution Number): HB 9

Specific Issue: EdChoice/School Choice

Are you testifying as a: Proponent Opponent Interested Party

Will you have a written statement, visual aids, or other material to distribute? Yes No

(If yes, please send an electronic version of the documents, if possible, to the Chair's office prior to committee. You may also submit hard copies to the Chair's staff prior to committee.)

How much time will your testimony require? 15 minutes

Please provide a brief statement on your position:

School choice is good for public schools and all children.

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Good Evening,

First of all, thank you for all of your work for children in Ohio. My name is Sharla Elton. Today I represent three perspectives. First, the perspective of a taxpayer and business woman, because as a Certified Management Accountant with an MBA who teaches Business and Finance classes at Universities locally, that is my DNA. Second, I represent non-public schools, as I have been the Superintendent of Heritage Christian School in Canton, Ohio for the past five years. Finally, I represent the voice of parents. So many parents are not able to come and present to you in person. They are busy getting their children dinner and baths about this time in the evening, and are likely exhausted after a long day of work on top of family activities. So, please allow me to share their words with you today.

Increasing school choice for all is very important. It comes down to competition and fit. Please remember these two words: competition and fit.

Competition is known to increase quality and lower costs. When people have lots of choices, organizations have to work harder to get people to choose them. In the case of education, it means that competition will result in schools providing a better education, at lower costs for the taxpayers. This is very needed. On cost, the inflation-adjusted total cost of a K through 12 public education in the U.S. rose more than 160% from 1970 to 2006 while the achievement of 17-year-olds in that same timeframe was virtually unchanged, according to the Cato Institute.

On quality, Ohio is in its third year of offering state-funded college admissions testing for all juniors. In 2019, only 23% of Ohio graduates met all four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks. This was a drop of 2% from the year before, and a 10% drop from 4 years prior.¹ When more than 75% of students are not graduating college ready in Ohio, we all have room for improvement.

School choice can help. Twenty-five of 27 research studies find that school choice competition improves PUBLIC schools. Three of the studies were done in Ohio (Forster (2008), Carr (2011), and Figlio & Karbownik (2016)) and all three show positive impact of school choice competition on the public schools.

If this is true, why are you hearing so many concerns from public educators about school choice? One simple answer: competition is not comfortable.

Last evening, I went to a workout class, and today I am a little sore. My muscles were stretched. They weren't used to working in new ways and in new directions. The benefits of exercise are well proven, but no one will say that exercise is comfortable. But exercise is good for us. In exactly the same way, competition is good for us. As we work to fill the needs of our students better, it will require us to stretch. It will require us to work in new ways and in new directions to improve. This is not comfortable, but it is good for our children and society. Exercise is hardest at first, and those muscles will groan and your heart will beat, much like the public schools are groaning now.

¹ <http://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/cccr-2019/Ohio-CCCR-2019.pdf>

As a non-public school, competition is guaranteed for us. In years where we didn't educate as well as we needed to, in years where we didn't fit families well, we lost students. In a building with about 220 precious lives, not one single child is guaranteed to me. To continue to operate as a school, I must constantly find new ways to educate children better, to love children and families better, and to meet their changing needs in new ways. Otherwise, I close, and I should close. Because if families leave, it means they found another location who provided a better education for their child. And that is what is most important to society – giving all children the very best education, regardless of what school they are in, or in which zip code they reside.

Yes, competition means that some schools may lose their students and close. Some may consolidate, as public schools often do. But this is for the benefit of children. If children can receive a better education in a different school, they should go to a different school. As a taxpayer, I want the best education for my tax dollar. I want the best return on my hard-earned money. Please do not say that because my property taxes fund Louisville City Schools as a requirement, that I am somehow choosing that school for my funding to support.

Now, don't misunderstand me, I am more than happy to fund education for children. I would probably even pay more, because I understand the vital role of education in society. I want healthy and strong public schools, non-public schools, charter schools, online schools, and homeschool options for children. Because choice is important. I, and the majority of Americans, think that taxpayers fund the education of children, and taxpayers should choose the best school for children. Parents should choose what school their child should attend. Not zip code, not income, not even district report cards, but parents – 100% of the time. The money is gathered for the child, the funding should go with that child. The funding is paid for by taxpayers, the funding should be allocated by taxpayers. Pretending that because I am forced to allocate my local dollars to a local public school, that I somehow am choosing to allocate my local dollars to a specific public school is downright silly.

School choice is widely popular. Just last month, a National School Choice poll shows that 67% of voters support school choice.² This was an increase of 4% from the prior year. “When asked, “Generally speaking, would you say you favor or oppose the concept of school choice?” and given the following definition, “School choice gives parents the right to use the tax dollars designated for their child’s education to send their child to the public or private school which best serves their needs,” two-thirds (67%) favor school choice, including 40% who strongly support it.”

Support is broad across demographics:

- Latinos: 73%
- Whites: 68%
- African Americans: 67%
- Millennials: 75%
- Parents and Grandparents: 72%

² <https://www.federationforchildren.org/national-school-choice-poll-shows-67-of-voters-support-school-choice-2019/>

- Ruran/Exurban Voters: 68%
- Suburban Voters: 64%
- Republicans: 80%
- Independents: 69%
- Democrats: 56%³

Why is support so high? Because people inherently know that not every child will fit every school. So, having the ability to choose a different school at any time that fits a child better is important. I personally do not like the term “Failing school.” We all can agree that some schools clearly educate children better than others. But every school, and I may do this myself, can bring you students to testify as to how they are doing wonderfully in their school - how it is a great fit for them. This is awesome! This is exactly what I and every taxpayer wants – a child to find the educational setting that is a great fit.

But what we, as schools, don’t bring before you – what we don’t highlight on our websites, and what we ALL have – are students who don’t find our schools to be a good fit. The very best public school district is NOT a perfect fit for every child in their district. The best private school is not a perfect fit for every child. I personally think every district should be on the school choice list, but I will settle for an increasingly expansive list, one in which you are debating doing away with now. You are going to hear a lot of stories, so although I could share countless with you, I will settle for one story for today. I’d like to talk about Ashton.

Ashton attended a great public school district. Starting in middle school, every day Ashton would fight his mother to go to school. He hated school. He told his mother as soon as he was legally old enough, that he was dropping out. Daily. And his grades were bad. Remember, this was in a great school. Mom, Rachelle, tried everything, and in his Sophomore year, she enrolled Ashton at Heritage Christian School. He was not happy, but Rachelle thought that she had nothing to lose. She was afraid that he would not graduate. Now, Ashton had been through a lot in his young life. But, Ashton was an entrepreneur. He started an online marketing business when he was 11 years old. In fact, he told his mother that he needed no education because he would always be working for himself.

Ashton’s first year at Heritage was rough. He got suspended for a time even. But, our staff did not give up on Ashton. He didn’t fit the typical mold, and so we, as educators, needed to change our approach. We wrapped around him in new and different ways. Rachelle elatedly told me after a parent-teacher conference, “The teachers really KNOW him, they actually know him!” One of our teachers became certified to teach College Credit Plus classes and taught an Entrepreneurship course. Ashton soared. He started taking other business College Credit Plus courses, and we customized his schedule so that it fit his ability to run his own business while taking college classes, and meeting high school requirements. As a non-public school, we could quickly adjust to meet Ashton’s needs.

³ <https://www.federationforchildren.org/national-school-choice-poll-shows-67-of-voters-support-school-choice-2019/>

Ashton's parents moved to an even wealthier and even higher performing public school district. They toured the public school, and it was gorgeous, full of light and solariums. Rachelle said it made her want to go there! Now, Heritage Christian School is in a nearly 100-year-old building with no air conditioning. Ashton would even bring a personal fan to school, plugging and unplugging it in each of his classes! We can in no way compete with solariums and the broad array of programs that public schools can offer with the funding they receive.

But Ashton said he wanted to stay at Heritage. He had found his fit. By his senior year, Ashton was on the Honor Roll even with his college and high school course load. His internal transformation was even greater. This student went from hating school every day, to saying "This school is a blessing." His Mom couldn't believe he made it to graduation in 2018, much less all he has achieved since. In two days, Ashton will turn 20 years old. His business is highly successful and he even returns to volunteer with us – that is, when he isn't busy traveling – enjoying the fruits of his own hard work.

Ashton's story shows us that even in successful districts, there are students who need a different fit. The fact that the public districts are so concerned about many students leaving further supports this. Wealthier families and good performing school districts should have school choice too. Paying more in income and property taxes is even more of a reason why the taxpayer should have choice on where the funds are spent.

No, the sky is not falling for public school funding due to EdChoice scholarships in Ohio. Facebook feeds and local conversations have been filled with discussions about school choice opportunities in Ohio, including a large dose of misinformation and panic. The truth is much more positive for the education of all children. EdChoice doesn't need fixed, because it isn't broken.

EdChoice designated schools in Ohio increased from 519 last year to 1,227 for the upcoming year. One reason for this jump was because the list was frozen for three years by the state. Had the list not been frozen, we would have likely seen more moderate increases over the past few years.

Public schools are not losing funding for students they are teaching. Public schools receive local funding, state funding, and federal funding. Public schools are funded locally through property taxes, and income taxes from levies. When a family chooses to attend a different school, the public school still gets to keep all of the local money. The public district actually makes more per student when it has to educate fewer students simply based on the math.

For the state funding portion, the Office of School Funding told me that Ohio has established a state share index for every school district. The value is \$6,020 per student, but each district gets a different percentage of that funding. The percentage is based on local capacity indicators, such as property valuation, wealth index, and similar factors that impact the local money that the district is receiving. If a district is getting a larger amount of local funding, the state will not fund them as much as a district receiving less local funding. As examples, Canton City's percentage is 88% (\$5,298 per student in state funding) and Plain Local is 84.3% (\$5,075 per student.)

As you well know, there are two kinds of EdChoice Scholarships. When a family qualifies for the scholarship based on the school district ratings, the state subtracts the scholarship from that public district. This makes sense. The district is receiving their share of state funding for that student, but has no responsibility in teaching that child. The public school gets to pocket any difference.

The average EdChoice per pupil was \$4,886 last year. 431 public districts receive more than that amount in total state funding. Continuing the examples above, Canton City will keep \$412 per district scholarship student and Plain Local will keep \$189 per student, in addition to the thousands of local dollars per student. This is good funding for a student that will not even step foot in their building. This funding model is unlike the ways other public programs, such as Medicaid or food support, operate.

The news gets even better for public school districts for the EdChoice Scholarships based on family income. When a family chooses the income-based EdChoice scholarship, the state pays for these scholarships out of their own budget. So, the public school keeps their entire share of state funding (over \$5,000 in the examples above) and local funding with no responsibility for that student. Free money.

Looking at non-financial factors also dispels myths. Schools that accept the scholarships must be chartered by the state of Ohio, have Ohio licensed teachers, go through an annual provider review process, and scholarship students take the exact same state tests as students in public schools. Research shows that school choice improves not only academics, but safety, civic engagement and more. Parents change schools because they want something different from the child's present school. So, it would make no sense to require non-public schools to operate identically to a school that the family has just left.

Our area students deserve the best education, and families should be able to choose the setting that best meets their child's unique needs. This is best accomplished with a variety of great public, private, charter, religious, online, and home school options. Families should be able to vote with their feet as to the way their funds are spent.

Parents and the general community are not as well organized and as well funded as the opposition. They are often intimidated in settings such as this, or even a phone call to your offices. The press is also not publishing their voices. A letter to the editor I wrote remains unpublished. After running an article on a public school press conference locally, I asked if the paper would also run a story on the other side of the issue. She said she would "definitely" give us a call for that story, but a month later, there has been no call and no article.

Competition in education is ok! Early childhood education allows parents to take public education funding to choose among many providers, as does college and university education. K-12 education is not so unique that it must be assigned based on zip code. People can pick their own doctors and hospitals with their Medicaid dollars. They can pick their own grocery store and food items with food support funding.

Children are not equivalent to municipal road service or trash removal. I encourage your to read the Forbes article titled “The Difference Between Roads and Education: The Human Mind” where Neal McCluskey writes, “Parks, roads, even policing, don’t come close to the intensely and fundamentally personal - fundamentally *human* – purpose of education. To assert that letting taxpaying families choose their schools is akin to letting them build private thoroughfares or parks with public dollars at best trivializes education, at worst threatens basic freedom. Indeed, far from calling for government control, the nature of education cries out for letting all people choose...Far more important, education is inherently about the shaping of minds, and that put people’s intimately held values and identities- things that make them who they are-in the balance. Requiring all, diverse people to fund a single system of government schools thus forces conflict and, even worse, threatens to implant standardized thoughts in all people. Parks and roads aren’t close to comparable threats to basic freedom and diversity...But education is fundamentally different from these things. For starters, there is no logical or demonstrated need for government to provide schools. Schools do not require great geographic space, education has been provided privately at significant scale, and there are numerous private schools operating today despite users having to pay once for public schools, and a second time for private. And as Nobel laureate Milton Friedman observed, government can ensure people can access education without providing the schools.”

In summary, public schools are still well-funded for the students they provide an education for. I expect taxpayers would be outraged to learn how much funding public schools keep for children they are not educating. It would be like Wal-Mart getting paid even when customers shop at Target.

Competition is good for society. It will force all schools to improve, and great schools are great for children. Some public schools, charter schools, and private schools may shrink or close. But, the children don’t disappear and jobs are not lost. When students move from one school to another, one school may reduce staff, but the other school is hiring. Competition forces schools to improve from the inside out.

Scholarships – both district and income – should be expanded. Children and families have diverse needs, and even in good school districts, there are families who need a different fit. Taxpayers fund our educational system, and taxpayers should be able to choose the school that works best for their child.

Finally, as a non-public Superintendent, I see the power of school choice every day. I invite you to come to our campus. Nearly all of our students attend using the EdChoice district and income vouchers. Some also use the Jon Peterson scholarships. I have a beautifully diverse student body. In a county where 86% of the population is white, and the non-English speaking population doesn’t even register, my school is different. 76% of my K-6 students identify as one or more minority races, and 6.4% of students qualify as English-language learners. Because of the high poverty rates of families, Heritage Christian School qualifies as a free-food building, which means that we provide free breakfast and free lunch to all students every day. We also have two full-time mental health counselors in our building to meet the needs of students.

Our students are successful. I could share countless heartfelt stories. And I can also share test data since all of our students take the Ohio state tests. We consistently outperform Canton City, where we are geographically located. In 2017-18, in comparison with the Ohio voucher average, Canton City Schools, and all other private schools in our area, Heritage Christian School was number 1 in 6 of 10 testing areas, and tied another school in one more.

Surviving on \$4,650 per student is exceptionally difficult, but we do it. Our building isn't as beautiful as I would like, our staff and faculty salaries are low, and we all wear multiple hats. In addition to Superintendent, I am the CFO, HR department, Building and Grounds, Department of Federal funds, Language Service Coordinator and more. I can only imagine the results – for both student achievement and faculty compensation, if the voucher payment was equitable to charter or public school funding. As an example, the highest paid person in our building last year, above me as Superintendent and a 39-year teacher was a Canton City Title Teacher. So for the public schools to be upset about giving up funding when they don't teach a student is mind-boggling to me.

The scholarship delay and uncertainty is causing great grief and heartache to families. Families are calling to enroll and I don't have any answers for them as to whether they have any funding. Families who were so excited about being able to come with a district-based scholarship have to be told to wait, and that it may not happen. Parents are trying to judge how many hours they would have to cut back at work in order to get under the income guidelines. I have to call those parents, and break that news to moms. I am here to tell you in person, they are not ok with having their choice stripped away.

I fear families will move out of areas of our community that are finally starting to rebuild if district scholarships are removed. The fact is that most families, middle and upper income, cannot afford the tuition of most schools today, especially for multiple children. If they are faced with a school that is underperforming, or simply not a good fit, and a scholarship is not available, they will likely move – taking vital tax funding with them.

School choice builds communities, improves quality, lowers costs, and returns the control to those who know the diverse and unique needs of their child best. It results in excellent public, charter, and non-public schools. Please expand both district and income-based vouchers. Thank you for your time.