

My name is Jerry Williams. I am a father of two students, and soon to be three, attending the East Liverpool Christian School in Columbiana County. I also serve on the school's Board of Education.

Thank you for considering my testimony in support of Ohio's EdChoice scholarship program.

I write to you to express my opposition to proposed bills that would change the currently enacted laws that govern the EdChoice scholarship program.

My two sons have attended a private school in our district since Kindergarten. My daughter will soon be enrolled as well. They do not qualify for any form of EdChoice scholarship, even under the currently enacted law which provides more opportunity for Ohio's families. My wife and I both graduated from this same private school, graduated from Youngstown State, left the state to pursue job opportunities, and returned to raise our family in our home state of Ohio. We have now been paying state taxes and local property taxes for over a decade to fund the education of some of Ohio's children, but not our own. Likewise, my parents sent five children to our private school, have paid state taxes and property taxes for 45 years, with zero return for their contribution to education funding. This is fundamentally unfair. The EdChoice Scholarship is a small step towards correcting that inequity.

Again, my children are ineligible for EdChoice scholarships, even with the recent expansion and addition of eligible schools. I write to you today in support of families similar to my own, but who are finally given an opportunity to receive some benefit for their tax dollars spent on education, only to see it potentially pulled away at the last minute by the legislature. These are families like my neighbor, a local farmer, whose children attend private school. He and his wife pay thousands of dollars every year in Ohio property taxes on their family farm. The current EdChoice program would allow those tax dollars to finally benefit the education of their own children.

I would also like to address several inaccuracies that have been circulating in response to the recent controversy over EdChoice. These are misrepresentations that I believe are unfair to proponents of EdChoice and the private schools who serve EdChoice students.

Many have attempted to describe EdChoice as "stealing" tax dollars from public schools to fund "rich" private schools. First, Ohio families that use Ohio's private schools are very much a part of the public and contribute more than our fair share to state and local education funds (usually without benefit). Second, while wealthy private schools obviously exist, it would be a gross mischaracterization to imply they are the norm. Take the private school my children attend as an example. The public school they would attend in the district recently built a beautiful new campus using roughly 50 million dollars in state funding. My children go to school just down the road in a 90-year-old building that is mostly maintained by volunteer parents such as myself. The average teacher's salary in Ohio's rural schools is about \$53,000. Our amazingly dedicated teachers earn less than \$20,000. Our school is clearly not "rich", yet we still provide a quality education on such limited funding. Taxpayer dollars in the form of EdChoice scholarships are certainly not wasted at our school. Ironically, the districts that would be most impacted in terms of local education funding are also the wealthiest.

Another common misrepresentation is the level to which Ohio's private schools are held to standards. The implication is often that, because private schools are not held to the same standard for EdChoice eligibility as public schools, there is no standard at all. Our school administers the same End of Course Ohio State Assessments administered by local public schools. Our third graders are held to the same Ohio

ELA Third Grade Reading Guarantee, and our High School students must pass the Ohio End of Course Tests to qualify for graduation. EdChoice-participating schools that elect not to administer the Ohio State Tests must administer an alternative form of assessment, as outlined by the State of Ohio.

Furthermore, private schools are held to the most impactful standard of all: funding. If private schools do not perform, families will choose to educate their children elsewhere. EdChoice is a small step towards making public schools accountable to this same standard. If you have any doubts about the powerful motivation funding provides to act, look no further than the current situation the state is embroiled in over the EdChoice program. As a taxpayer of the State of Ohio, I want to see the public education I fund rise to meet the standard, rather than the state legislature lower the standard to protect funding for schools that are not performing. If our goal is to increase the quality of education across the state, the last thing we should be doing is discouraging competition and choices for Ohio's families.

Finally, it is important to take notice of why we find ourselves in the present situation - making last-minute changes to law that was previously enacted by the legislature and signed by the governor. We are here because Ohio families responded **positively** to the EdChoice program. Our families **want** to exercise free choice with respect to how and where their children are educated. It seems to me we are now denying those opportunities at the final hour. Our school is in an economically depressed area. Roughly half of our students, about 50, have taken advantage of the EdChoice scholarships you provided to fund their best education outcome. Most of them are income-based scholarships while some have elected to leave schools that were not meeting standards. The law that you already passed would allow more children the same opportunity.

Ohio families are clearly telling us they want EdChoice because **they are using it**. I implore you to leave the current law as is.

Thank you for listening.

Jerry Williams