

February 14, 2020

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Interested Party Testimony - House Bill 9 Conference Committee

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee: thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify on the proposed changes to Ohio's school choice system.

I am testifying as an educator, administrator and also as an advocate for the families and children at my school. Ohio's educational ecosystem is complex and multifaceted. Each part of the system plays a role in providing opportunities to Ohio's children that will raise student achievement and prepare every student to be equipped to succeed in the workforce of the future.

I have spent 30+ years as an educator in Ohio, as a special education teacher, a building administrator, a curriculum supervisor, continuous improvement director and later the Superintendent of Big Walnut Local Schools and New Albany Plain Local Schools. I also worked at Battelle for Kids where I helped design a collaborative framework for a consortium of 26 Appalachian districts to leverage improvement resources and expertise across small rural districts. We secured \$16 million in federal Race to the Top funding for this project and \$50 million from the Teacher Incentive Fund grant. Our work helped launch a national conversation to focus on the unique needs of small rural schools. Also at Battelle for Kids, I worked with Houston Public Schools on a project co-funded by Dell Foundation to create performance metrics linked to the district's mission/vision and improvement goals for student achievement.

My experience in public, private, rural and urban education has taught me several things:

1. All students deserve high-quality education that is focused on preparing them to be successful.
2. Change takes time and requires engagement and empathy to understand all parts of the ecosystem because local, state and national educational systems are dynamic and interdependent.
3. All parts of the educational ecosystem - public schools, private schools, charter schools, homeschools - are valuable and offer options for parents to choose the best fit to meet the unique needs of individual families and children. Family alignment or "best fit" education is essential to spur all children to their highest levels of achievement.

The most recent Jobs Report by the World Economic Forum in 2018 paints a stark picture of what's to come for Ohio's children. The rate of automation across all industries is quickly changing what skills employers are looking for in our students. According to this report, the top 3 growing skills identified by employers are analytical thinking and innovation, active learning and creativity, originality and initiative. Alternatively, the 3 top declining skills are: manual dexterity,

memory (including verbal, auditory and spatial abilities) and management of financial and material resources.

Today's students are getting ready to enter a workforce where knowledge itself is not enough to be successful. Students need to be able to apply knowledge, not just recite it. If we want Ohio to continue to be competitive nationally and globally, our students have to be ready to innovate, think differently, adapt and apply their knowledge.

So, we have to ask ourselves whether Ohio's educational ecosystem is focused on the right things. Right now, some of the EdChoice program changes you are considering are significant revisions to one piece of the ecosystem that can devastate the existence of many private schools across the state that are serving Ohio families and students. This program has been in place for over a decade and may now be completely dismantled in 60 days in an attempt to try to resolve issues that need to be addressed in other ways. The conversation about what our schools, communities and students need is much bigger than this one program. At the same time, changes to this one program could create an unintended ripple effect and upend parts of our ecosystem that are working.

My career in public education in suburban, urban and rural areas and now in private education has led me to see time and time again that there are no quick fixes. We must strive to find the delicate balance that is capable of creating environments for all of Ohio's children to flourish because our students flourishing is the ultimate goal.

I am the Head of School at Gahanna Christian Academy where we believe we are part of a movement to recreate the future of education. Our goal is to provide a state-of-the-art, research-based environment for students who would not otherwise have this opportunity. Approximately 80% of our students receive the EdChoice scholarship and 50% of our students qualify for the EdChoice Expansion program due to low income. Many of our students face real challenges outside of the classroom that have the potential to affect their learning and their ability to graduate. Our microschool is small enough to be able to support each student and family individually who may get lost in a larger system. Parents choose to send their students to GCA for multiple reasons: they want a faith-based school, they want more focused, individualized attention at a small school, they believe their designated school is unsafe or unfit for their child, or their child flourishes in the alternative hands-on learning environment we offer.

The heart of Ohio's school choice system is that parents have the option to find the best-fit school for their child. Many parents in Columbus and around Ohio depend on this choice being available to them.

Several of the ideas currently being discussed could not only close our school, but negatively impact schools serving traditionally underserved students. With 80% of our kids on vouchers and 50% of our students in poverty, we will have to close our doors if 30% lose their voucher. We have dozens of families on hold right now who applied to our school in

December only to find out less than two weeks ago that they may have to send their child to a school they never intended. Without EdChoice, these families face enormous decisions like potentially selling their homes and moving out of communities that they are invested in, because they desire a different educational experience for their child.

As a former public school teacher, administrator, superintendent, and school improvement consultant, I understand the challenges and glaring inaccuracies in Ohio's current school accountability system that led to an unbalanced EdChoice eligibility list this year and ultimately tipped the scales of our educational ecosystem. However, I do not believe that fast, mid-year, sweeping changes to any part of this system will be beneficial for Ohio's children and families.

The Ohio General Assembly has demonstrated a commitment to pursuing the best for Ohio's children and you have the opportunity to play a role in being part of a movement for the future of education for Ohio's children. The General Assembly has supported the future of education through the Straight A fund, identification of STEM and STEAM programs and the innovation school pilot program. Each of these efforts, along with EdChoice, are part of providing varied opportunities to Ohio's children to prepare the next generation for a rapidly changing global economy and workforce.

So, I ask you committee members to carefully consider and vet all changes that will affect Ohio's educational ecosystem. **I urge you to pursue incremental and measured changes so that we can cultivate and protect the delicate balance in the educational ecosystem of our state** as well as consider the impact to all the parents and children who will be affected by any broadstroke changes.

Yesterday a public school Superintendent colleague shared on NPR that his concern is not ending or disrupting participation for all the students who already have EdChoice scholarships but the expansion to so many more who are already at private schools not receiving a scholarship who would now receive one. This seems like a measured and reasonable idea to strike a balance in a short amount of time while the complex, dynamic and beautifully diverse ecosystem of Ohio's educational options for families can be analyzed accurately and fairly and appropriate adjustments can be made in reasonable time frames for implementation.

I believe that you will pursue first and foremost what is best for Ohio's children. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have about my testimony, my expertise or experience in education.