

February 14, 2020

Ohio Federation of Teachers  
Conference Committee HB 9 Testimony  
Presented by Melissa Cropper, OFT President

Chairman Jones and members of the H.B. 9 Conference Committee, I am Melissa Cropper, a library media specialist from Georgetown, OH currently on leave to serve as President of the Ohio Federation of Teachers and Secretary Treasurer of the Ohio AFL-CIO. I am here not only as a teacher, union member, and OFT President but also as a mother of five, who knows the vital role that quality public schools play in our communities.

After listening to testimony the past few days, I would be remiss if I did not start my testimony with a shout out to our public schools and public school teachers across the state. Because I think it is highly important to understand what are teachers are experiencing and what is happening in our classrooms, I make an effort to be in our schools as much as possible. I often leave these visits with mixed feelings – a mixture of awe at what I see happening and sadness at hearing all the challenges our children are dealing with on a daily basis. I challenge each of you to find time to regularly visit a school, especially those wrongly labeled as “failing.” Don’t just do a staged walk through. Meet with the teachers and administrators. Talk with them about their students and the needs they are bringing to the classroom. Ask them what else they need to help their students be successful. I think you will leave with a much different impression that the picture that has been painted in this room this week.

Before I delve into the different possible remedies for the voucher funding crisis, I want to be crystal clear about what our position is. We believe that public dollars should be used for public education. We believe that diverting funds away from our public schools hurts public school students, whether those funds are being deducted from the state budget or local school districts. We believe that depriving public schools of funding is a dangerous, slippery slope that could undermine a central pillar of our democracy, the right to a quality public education. However, as long as public funds are being used for private schools, we believe any school that receives public money should be held accountable to the same standards as public schools.

While that is our position, we are not here today to be dogmatic. We are here to urge you to take sensible bipartisan measures to reduce the harm that school districts, and the students they serve, are experiencing from performance-based EdChoice voucher deductions, and to ensure that public school students have the adequately-funded education that they are entitled to under Ohio’s Constitution.

Due to a number of escalating policies from this legislature and from the Department of Education, we have a situation where school districts are paying out of their district funds to educate students who had never enrolled, or intended to enroll, in their districts. That means that this is not about school choice; this is about direct subsidies for private education.

The Cleveland Heights-University Heights School District lost \$7.36 million to voucher deductions in Fiscal Year 2019. Of that money, \$4.35 million was completely unfunded by the state and came out of local school funds. Only six percent of the current students receiving

vouchers in the district had ever attended their public schools. The voters in that school district will have to vote in March whether to authorize a new school levy, of eight mills, just a few short years after their last levy, to cover the loss of local funds going to private schools. And we know that if no action is taken by the legislature, and the list of EdChoice performance voucher schools grows to 1200 schools, taxpayers across the state will need to authorize levy after levy to make up the deficit.

Proponents of expanded vouchers will talk about the “expectations” of parents who thought their children’s schools would be eligible for vouchers. What about the expectations of public school parents who are counting on their children being able to receive a quality education in their community? And what about the expectation of taxpayers that when they vote for a levy, they’re sending their taxes to pay for local, public schools?

Vouchers proponents also talk about “failing public schools.” That designation is based on a system of report cards that almost everyone in the legislature and in the education community acknowledges is broken and arbitrary. Meanwhile, the only reason why we don’t also hear about “failing private schools,” is because even when they receive public funds through vouchers, private schools are left completely ungraded.

However, here’s what we do know: recent data from the Ohio Department of Education shows that voucher student test scores continue to lag those of students in public schools. Statewide in Ohio in 2019, 41% of voucher students’ tests received an F – a percentage far higher than the threshold for a public school to be considered failing. This data isn’t unique to Ohio. Other states, including Louisiana, Florida, Indiana and Washington, D.C. have similar poor results for voucher students.

The current situation needs correction. Here are some of the remedies, taken from HB 9 and SB 89, that we urge you to include in your conference committee report:

- Immediate funding relief to school districts like Cleveland Heights-University Heights that have been harmed in Fiscal Year 2019 by large percentages of vouchers students.
- A transition away from performance-based vouchers, which rely on the flawed report card system and are deducted from local district funds, and toward income-based vouchers paid from the state budget.
- An end to the undemocratic Academic Distress Commissions that punish school districts and strip locally elected school boards of their ability to make decisions that improve their schools and communities.

There are also longer term issues that the legislature as a whole must tackle, including:

- A fair school funding formula that meets our constitutional duty to adequately and equitably fund our public schools.
- The state’s flawed and punitive school report cards that have accelerated the problem with school voucher funding.
- Closing the accountability gap between public schools and voucher-receiving private schools and providing transparent data about the efficacy of private school vouchers.

For years, we have talked about the impact vouchers were having on districts similar to Cleveland Heights. But those concerns were largely ignored until suburban schools were designated as low performing. We're glad that there is energy – and some bipartisan agreement – around addressing this problem, but it will be unconscionable if the remedy this legislature puts in place only assists the suburban school districts who are about to be negatively affected and not the school districts who have already been harmed.

We must stop starving public schools of the funds they need to educate their students. We have a constitutional mandate to fund a system of common schools. We are not currently in compliance with that mandate, and we're falling further every time a new state policy increases the amount of public funds diverted to private schools.

This concludes my testimony and I welcome any questions you have.