

House Bill 9  
Interested Party Testimony  
February 14, 2020

Chairman Jones and members of the HB9 Conference Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program. My name is Keith Millard, and I serve as the proud superintendent of Batavia Local Schools.

We have much to be proud of in public education, and the students of the Batavia Local School District are strivers, achievers, and poised to make their mark on the world. Tomorrow, students from Batavia Middle School will be traveling to Washington D.C. to participate in the national Future Cities competition, after recently winning the State competition in Columbus. Members of our high school Business Professionals of America program will be competing at the State BPA Competition in March, recently raised over \$8,000 for Special Olympics, and are regularly recognized at the national level for their commitment to community service. Our high school engineering students are currently building drones to compete in drone racing, and the high school was recently recognized by the College Board for expanded access to and student performance in Advanced Placement courses. The Batavia Local School District as a whole is highly regarded for the individualized support that is provided to students. We continue to grow through new resident move-ins and the return of students who have experimented with other school options and are choosing Batavia due to the quality of the overall educational experience.

My testimony today is in support of the Legislature working to arrive at a solution to reverse the dramatic expansion of the EdChoice Scholarship list. This list has ballooned due to an accountability system in need of a substantial overhaul and the significant narrowing of the criteria by which non-failing schools have become eligible.

While I, along with all public school advocates are grateful to the Legislature for passing a short term delay to the EdChoice application window in SB120, my concern is that almost a quarter of the extension days have already elapsed. Time is dwindling to arrive at a solution given that competing bills in the forms of HB9 and SB89 are now before the legislature.

Public schools, who are responsible for serving all who enroll, and are the choice for over 90% of all students who attend a K-12 school in the State of Ohio, should not be seen as a piggy bank for those who favor school choice and privatization of education. Public schools have a significant number of fixed costs, and the direct deduction of funds from public schools for a voucher system based on a flawed accountability model has a significant negative impact on students who remain in the public schools from which the funds are diverted. This harms students.

The reality is that the expansion of the EdChoice voucher program to capture schools from over 70% of the Districts in Ohio is a significant overreach from the narrow scope for which the performance based EdChoice program was founded. Inappropriately labeling public schools as failing in order to expand the pool of scholarship eligible students has created negative perceptions of Ohio's education system from those inside and outside of the State.

In the 37 years since 'A Nation At Risk' was published, the GDP of the United States has grown an average of 2.89 percent per year, and a technological transformation of our global society has occurred, largely due to American companies creating uniquely American products utilizing American ingenuity with employees who largely are the products of America's public schools.

Furthermore, the leaders of some of the most storied and innovative companies in recent memory, including Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Chad Hurley (YouTube), Sheryl Sandberg (Facebook), and Tim Sweeney (Epic Games/Fortnite) all have one thing in common. They are products of public schools.

What places our Nation's schools at risk today is the constant wrenching changes by school reform advocates determined to create a narrative that paints public schools as failing institutions. Ohio's current broken accountability system and our continued overreliance on standardized tests for accountability purposes is harmful to students. Our economy requires creative, adaptive thinkers who possess the types of flexible, non-linear skills that will be necessary to compete in the post information age. Our current accountability and school choice policies do not promote these competencies. They create harm to students and communities.

It is time to end the demonization of public education in Ohio, and move away from policies and accountability systems that punish public schools for the one thing they most valiantly do, which is provide excellent educational opportunities for ALL who enter the doors. The sustained economic growth and unparalleled rate of American innovation of the past three and a half decades would not have been possible if our public schools were truly failing. It is beyond time to halt educational policies that divide Ohio communities and pit educational factions against one another. The false narratives of public school failure only serves to harm Ohio's long term economic prospects, and has created a toxic environment that frays at the fabric of local communities.

As there are now two competing bills that approach solving the EdChoice voucher expansion problem from very different perspectives, I implore the members of the General Assembly to consider what is possible to achieve over the next 45 days. If bipartisan compromise can not be reached that creates a long term solution to Ohio's voucher program using the proposals outlined in SB89, I would urge the passage of a shorter term fix as outlined in HB9. This would provide sufficient time to adequately study true scholarship reform and couple this work with needed school accountability and school funding reform.

Ohio has a history of rushed legislative processes which result in poorly enacted laws that require subsequent legislative fixes. The current EdChoice and territory transfer issues are the latest examples of this long term problem. Please give careful consideration to what is pragmatically possible in the next 47 days, and at a minimum, provide relief to schools inappropriately placed on the EdChoice expansion list through enacting the proposals in HB9.

Chairman Jones and members of the HB9 conference committee, thank you for your work on this important issue and for the opportunity to provide input regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program. I am happy to address your questions.