

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program. I am Dr. Walter Skaggs, superintendent of St. Clairsville-Richland City schools. I have been a public school administrator for 24 years, prior to which I taught special education at Lima Senior High School. During that time I have witnessed numerous legislative changes that have resulted in both intended and unintended consequences. It is my hope that the EdChoice conundrum we are in today was in fact unintended.

EdChoice was instituted to assist low income families residing in a "failing public school district" by providing them with the financial assistance needed to attend a school of their choice. It was not created to fund scholarships in nearly 70% of Ohio's districts, many of which received building grades of A's, B's or C's. My district received a district grade of "B" and building grades of "B" at all levels. However, due to K-3 literacy, St. Clairsville Elementary was placed on the EdChoice List. In the K-3 literacy component of our school report card, we were given deductions based on the performance of four students, one of which was identified as gifted. These students passed their diagnostic tests, they were not on reading improvement plans, and they passed the reading portion of the English Language Arts state assessment; however, they were not proficient on the writing portion of the English Language Arts test. We were made EdChoice eligible based upon the performance of four students in writing, not reading. A building should not be considered failing because four students had a bad test day. This type of skewed accountability cannot be rationalized, especially when it leads to a district losing thousands of dollars to fund vouchers.

The list of "failing schools" has grown each year. In fact, under the current criteria there are over 1,200 buildings on the list. Is the education in Ohio that bad? Absolutely not! Perhaps it is the mechanism currently being used to create the list. I think we can all agree that the state report card has not only made our state look less than appealing, but also created a climate that has proven to be detrimental to our staff and students. The state report card has been scrutinized for years, yet we continue to use it drain the coffers of our public institutions.

School districts now have to take money that could otherwise be used to improve curriculum, technology, staff and facilities to fund the EdChoice vouchers. In some cases, districts have to consider going back to the local taxpayers to make up the deficit caused by these vouchers. We currently have 30 students receiving EdChoice vouchers. All of which are in KG, have never stepped foot in our

buildings and had no intentions of ever doing so. Our district receives \$2,705 per pupil from the state. This means that \$1,945 of the \$4,650 awarded to each elementary student who takes a voucher, and \$3,295 of the \$6,000 awarded for each high school voucher comes from our local taxpayers. The end result for St. Clairsville-Richland City Schools should these students continue to receive the vouchers is \$1,500,000.

In addition, this change takes place during a time in which the state passed a biennial budget that included no increase in the formula funding over the next two years. This means that districts with EdChoice eligible buildings are taking a huge step backwards when it comes to keeping revenue “in-district” to fund important programming. Even more problematic is that when students who have never attended our school come back to claim a voucher, the full amount of their voucher is funded with local tax dollars because we have never received one cent of state funding for these students.

Our public schools have proven to be successful throughout the years. In spite of the flawed report card, which has done nothing more than bash public education, our public institutions have continued to produce some of the brightest, most highly successful and resilient young men and women you would ever meet. My district has a 96.2% graduation rate and sends an average of 80% of graduating seniors to post-secondary institutions. Far from failing! It’s time to remove the flawed performance-based criteria as a mechanism to determine who should or should not be on the failing school list. Senate Bill 89 would do just that.

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 conference committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide input regarding Ohio’s EdChoice Voucher program. I am happy to address your questions.