



## Ed. Choice Committee Hearing | Saint Mary School

- **Introduction: Kayla Walton**

Hello everyone! My name is Kayla Walton, and I am the principal of Saint Mary School in German Village. On behalf of our students, faculty, and staff, I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak to all of you today.

Abraham Lincoln once said, “Every head should be cultivated.” As a teacher and now as a principal, I believe to the very core of my being that this is true. I believe that every child, regardless of their race, socioeconomic background, gender, and zip code has the right to not just a good education, but a great, high-quality education whether it be private, parochial, or public. I hope and trust that this is the goal of each and every person in this room. If this is the goal, I must raise the question, “Why should parents not have the right to choose what they believe is a great-high quality education for their child?”

I in no way want to see our public schools fail, but as a principal, I must raise the question, how is removing the Ed. Choice performance-based scholarship for our students just to our parents who are essentially ‘double-paying’ for an education through their tax dollars and tuition? How is this just to our teachers who pay thousands of dollars to school districts each year that they will never see or be able to use to support their instruction and their students? I know that these are complex questions that cannot be answered with a simple ‘yay’ or ‘nay’. Therefore, I ask that you take the time to

examine all aspects of this situation and remember who these decisions impact: our teachers, our parents, and ultimately our students.

Today, we have a few members of our student body here to share their experiences and what opportunities the Ed. Choice Scholarship has afforded them. Our first student is Christopher Cade. As we lovingly refer to him at our school, he is our ‘future mayor’. We have no doubt that his captivating personality will touch your hearts just as it did ours. Following his testimony, you will hear from Mabry Hill, another incredible, joyful and talented eighth grade student whose family has greatly benefited from the Ed. Choice Scholarship.

- **Student Testimonies**

- Christopher Cade: “When asked the question, ‘What does Saint Mary School mean to you?’, I came to the conclusion that Saint Mary School is a home. I have been here most of my life, and my experiences have shaped who I am now. Without the Ed. Choice Scholarship, I wouldn’t have been able to attend Saint Mary School, and I wouldn’t be the person I am today.
- Mabry Hill: “To me, Saint Mary School is a safe place where we are free to talk about our beliefs. At our school, everyone feels like a big family, and I feel safe to talk to any teacher about anything and know that they will be there for me. Without the Ed. Choice Scholarship, I wouldn’t see my parents as much because they would have to work a lot more, which would be hard for me and my two sisters who also attend Saint Mary School.”

- **Assistant Principal Testimony: Marc Sterner**

“Thank you, Christopher and Mabry, for your incredible testimonies. As Miss Walton stated, our students and their parents deserve the right to choose an education that is best for their child, whether it is private, parochial, or public. The solution to the situation at hand is not to completely eliminate performance-based scholarships, but rather address the issue of our state grade-card system that led to some schools being on the list in the first place. Removing the scholarships does not change the ‘designated’ status of some high-performing public schools, which is also unjust. As legislators, you have the opportunity and obligation to reevaluate the system that led to this complex issue in the first place.

Additionally, some opponents of the Ed. Choice Scholarship have stated that the funds from this scholarship should be directed towards the designated public schools to improve instruction. While I appreciate and understand this logic, I must reiterate that our students who receive the Ed. Choice Scholarship receive *less than half* of the per pupil amount that is spent at a nearby public district; each Ed. Choice recipient receives \$4,650 and the public school less than seven blocks away receives \$11,010 per child. How is this just that we receive less than 50% of what the public school receives, and yet we are charged with providing a high-quality and high-performing education?

Additionally, every recipient of the Ed. Choice Scholarship is one less child that the public school is tasked with educating, so couldn't the remaining \$6,360 per pupil amount be given to the assigned public school to provide additional support and funding?

As Miss Walton stated before, this is a complex issue with many different facets, and we know that there is not a simple solution. With that being said, the first step to

finding a solution is to thoughtfully research and hear those who will be impacted by this decision. In addition to our staff and students, our parents will certainly be affected by the decision that is made. We are blessed to have parents here with us who can share their thoughts and perspectives. The first parent I would like to introduce is Steve Morbitzer, the president of our School Advisory Board. Steve's two children, Rachael and Slane, attend our school, and as a long-time resident of German Village, he has a unique perspective of this situation."

- **Parent Testimony: Steve Morbitzer**

Good morning and thank you for this opportunity. My name is Steve Morbitzer and I'm the School Advisory Board President for St. Mary's School here in Columbus, Ohio. I am here today to support continuing the Ohio EdChoice scholarship program as it is. Currently the program is offered to students who feed into an underperforming public school regardless of income.

The proposed legislation ties funds for education to income. This would negatively impact families and neighborhoods. Middle income families would be forced to send their children to an underperforming school. Parents would must spend more money to choose the education for their children or move to a district with better performing schools. Given the rising costs of housing this may not be possible, if it is possible families may be moving out of areas which need stabilization. These families are already paying for an education with their tax dollars.

To force these families to spend more money on education would take money away from their housing, retirement, medical bills, food, etc. Why force them to pay twice?

This will also affect real estate sales. Currently a family can move into an area with under performing schools and feel confident they can send their children to get a quality education.

Would families move into Marion Village, Olde Towne East or The Olde Oaks knowing they would have to pay for tuition on top of their tax dollars?

Ohio's scholarship (voucher) programs are about social justice. Individuals and families of means have always exercised school choice by choosing to live in districts with public schools of their liking (choice by residential selection). Vouchers expand that choice to others.

Education cures the sick, eradicates poverty and destroys prejudice. Please place students and families first and continue the current state of Ed. Choice.

- **Assistant Principal Testimony: Marc Sterner**

Thank you, Mr. Morbitzer, for your powerful testimony. We have also gathered statements from parents who were not able to come this morning, but wanted their voice to be heard.

The following testimony is from a parent whose two children attend our school: "Our family has been very blessed and while we do not financially require the Ed. Choice program, being able to have access to it due to our residence location, has enabled our family to distribute funds normally reserved for tuition, back into the school and church towards activities, projects, updates, supplies, etc. that the school/church may be in need

of but may not have the budget to cover at times. We have planted gardens on school grounds, provided classrooms with learning supplies, toys and crafts, brought in a speaker for the entire school to learn from, donated towards building renovations, and numerous other classroom activities that we would otherwise not be able to provide for if not having access to the Ed Choice program. It better allows us the opportunity to contribute on a more full-circle, all-encompassing manner to the school and church community which, in our opinion, helps provide a happier, more well-rounded community in general. To be able to provide for many, vs just tuition allocated areas is a wonderful thing!”

Another parent, Carletta Griffis wrote, “I am writing to express my deepest gratitude as a recipient of the EdChoice scholarship program. I want you to know how valuable this program is to our family. As a public school teacher and a single mother of two beautiful African American children, the EdChoice program has granted our family the opportunity to attend a school which reflects our religious beliefs without the added burden of financial stress.

Because we are EdChoice recipients, my girls have the privilege to attend private schools which meet their unique individual needs. This opportunity could not be extended to us without the EdChoice program.

As a teacher and a parent, I feel it is so important that children have a learning environment in which they can thrive. The EdChoice program enabled our family a way to find a thriving educational learning community, without the financial burden. Our family and perhaps many other families will have to face a difficult decision if this program ceases to exist.

It is my earnest prayer that a solution can be made that will benefit all parties involved and that no children or families will have to make school choice decisions due to lack of resources or funding changes.”

I would now like to invite Katelyn Gibboney, one of our second grade teachers, forward to share her testimony.

- **Teacher Testimony: Katelyn Gibboney**

As a second-grade teacher, I have seen and have experienced first-hand the benefits of school choice. I have seen countless students with different needs who have thrived in our setting. These students who had a variety of learning, medical, and emotional needs shared one thing in common- their parents were freely able to choose the type of education that was best for them. As educators, we are taught and we experience that each and every learner is diverse and that no needs are the same. As government officials, I hope and pray that you see this too.

No educational needs are the same, and therefore, parents should have the right to choose how and where their tax dollars are spent- whether this be in a private school, a parochial school, or a public school. Each of these schools come with its own unique services and settings, which are able to support children in such individual and beautiful ways. But who is best to determine where a child would thrive? The parent. Parents know their children infinitely better than any legislator, educator, or administrator ever could, so why would we not give them the chance to decide what would be best for their child?

Again, as Miss Walton stated, this is a complex issue that involves many different perspectives and voices, some of which are here today. At this time, I invite two more of

our students, Reyana Hairston and Chloe Best, to speak about what a private education and the Ed. Choice Scholarship mean to them.

- **Student Testimonies:**

- Chloe Best: “I have attended Saint Mary School since kindergarten, and I love the opportunities I have had to attend community and family events, Mass, and so much more. It has been a joy to be at Saint Mary’s with family and friends who I love. The Ed. Choice Scholarship has really helped my family- my brother who is in college also benefited from this scholarship.
- Reyana Hairston: “Saint Mary School has had a big impact on my life. I have been able to meet people and learn about the Catholic faith even though I am a Christian. I have been filled with knowledge, and there is a great support system at our school. They offer a lot of sports and extracurricular opportunities too! If we didn’t have the Ed. Choice Scholarship, I would be at a public school, and I wouldn’t be able to share my faith.”

- **Parent Testimony**

Thank you Chloe and Reyana! We would also like to take the time to share a fourth parents’ testimony:

**To Ohio Legislators considering the removal of the Ed Choice Scholarship Program:**

My name is Kim Phillips and I am the mother of three wonderful boys, all of whom leverage and utilize Ohio’s Ed Choice Scholarship Program.

**As a single mother living within the Columbus Public School (CPS) system, this program is not only a wonderful benefit, it is a necessary one for my family to thrive within the educational system.**

Saint Mary School in German Village is a staple of our community. It is *the* primary reason for families staying within the area. 20 years ago, the majority of people that lived here who were starting families relocated outside of our area to seek education for their growing children.

**Today, they stay here and enroll their most valued asset—their children—at St. Mary School.** Because we live within CPS, we have access to vouchers through the Ed Choice Scholarship Program to help us off-set

the cost of tuition. We stay because the school has proven to us that they go above and beyond to teach, support and protect our children. For many families, this is the difference between a heightened education which offers a close-to-home nurturing and supportive educational environment and one within the public-school system where, oftentimes, the student does not receive the same access to attention and course correction.

**I'd like to outline a few points which will help you to gain context and insight into how truly necessary this program is for the benefit of three wonderful boys:**

- **St. Mary School is—and should continue to be—a place where students are not only academically engaged and challenged**, but also formed to be responsible citizens, compassionate individuals and productive members of society.  
***We need the Ed Choice Program to continue to build upon the strength of the school's academic culture.***
- **Saint Mary School's strength lies in its diversity.** With over 400 students representing 26 zip codes, our school provides a nurturing and safe environment for students ranging in age from pre-school through the eighth grade.  
***We need the Ed Choice Program to continue to provide children with a "view to the real world" through its diverse population.***
- **As we continue to attract and retain an even stronger student base, we must invite the community to be a part of our school's growth.**  
***We need the Ed Choice Program in order to attract and retain not only our students but also our families.***

**If you take away the Ed Choice Program, you will be doing the strongest possible disservice to the strength of one of Columbus' most valued, historic and highly populated communities.** We will lose families and the community will effectively lose all of the momentum, advancements and foundations it has worked so unbelievably hard to build.

**Do the right thing: Continue to support the Ed Choice Program.** Why? Because our children deserve the right to the highest and best educational opportunities our region can offer.

Thank you.  
Kim Phillips

- **Conclusion: Kayla Walton**

As you can see, this situation is complex, but it affects real people, real children who have spoken to each of you. As Abraham Lincoln stated, "I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live by the light I have." Regardless of the outcome of this situation, I believe in my heart that educational choice is true, just, and successful. I am encouraged and invigorated by this opportunity to share the great things that are happening at Saint Mary School and so many schools

that have been the recipients of funding from the Ed. Choice Scholarship. I pray that you will take to heart all that was said and truly make a decision that protects educational freedom and positively impacts all students.