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Good morning chairman Jones and members of the committee. My name is Susie Kaeser. I am the education specialist for the LWVO and a resident of the Cleveland Heights-University Heights school district. I am a long-time advocate for my public schools and our precious system of public education. Thirty years ago I founded a community organization that mobilizes the resources of our community to support the success of our public schools. We own our public schools, we benefit from them, and we have a lot to contribute to their success.

We also need to speak up for them.

There is nothing more important to our democracy and to ensuring an educated citizenry than providing a free education, open to all, where every child is of equal value and deserves the best we can provide. Communities benefit from an educated citizenry and this is why we agree to use our public funds to provide for this opportunity and guarantee access to all. Supporting our public schools is a civic duty and reflects something of great value to me, the willingness of strangers to invest in the success of future generations.

The LWVO is opposed to vouchers. Using public funds for private education is not within the tradition of our public system nor is it in the best interest of an adequately funded public system. The legislature is responsible for adequately funding a system of common schools. This must be the priority for the use of state tax funds.

While eliminating vouchers is not on the table today, you are deciding what criteria to use to award them, and how to fund them. Your choices have significant consequences for public schools.

I urge you to limit the negative impact on our public system by taking this policy route:

- abandon the report card as the basis for triggering Edchoice vouchers,
- end the deduction method of funding them,
- establish narrow limits for awarding income-based vouchers so they are based on actual need,
- establish a fair system for distributing this opportunity, and
- provide financial relief to districts that are already suffering under the consequences of the deduction method of funding religious education. I would urge you to target high poverty districts that lose a disproportionate amount of their state aid to voucher deductions.

The CH-UH district has long been an Edchoice district and HB 9 won't change that. But I wanted to testify because this is my opportunity to tell you how state policies have damaged one community so you might avoid doing this to 300 more.

Our public system is a partnership between state government and local communities. I believe that the state report card and the four voucher programs have made state government more of an enemy of our public schools than a partner. It simply does not make sense to promote a false narrative of failure, demand quality, and then take away the resources to provide that quality. The big losers are our most vulnerable students, the students who most depend on our public system to thrive.

I know we can do better than that. We have to.

As the current voucher crisis has shown, the report card is a terribly flawed metric for defining quality. As results over time and expert researchers have proven, test scores measure income. The report card discriminates against school districts whose children live in poverty and simply uses too narrow a view of education to come close to measuring quality. Yet you make expensive decisions based on an incomplete assessment.

You might enjoy labeling schools as failures, but I assure you no one living in my community appreciates that label, especially since anyone who knows our schools and our children know that your assessment is wrong. This is not fair. Do not underestimate the harm that the report card inflicts on a community. I do not understand why the legislature thinks this is beneficial for making schools excel.

Not only is the report card an inaccurate measure of quality, but quality is rarely the reason people actually use a voucher. Voucher use in my community is about religion. Only 90 of the 1,400+ Edchoice vouchers that we pay for are for children leaving our public schools. And only a handful of them enroll in a school that is not religious.

So please don't use the report card as the qualifier for access to vouchers. If you want people to use public funds for private education don't cloak it in a quest for quality.

My second concern is the deduction method of funding vouchers.

The state is not holding up its part of the partnership when state funds appropriated for public school students don't reach those students because they are diverted to pay for vouchers.

This is especially problematic and illogical since for the most part, it is the poorest children who are deprived of the full share of the public investment in their education.

The deduction method is an interesting arrangement that allows the legislature to advance its agenda without paying for it. The state budget only pays part of the cost, which means you can cut taxes or fund other priorities. But it passes on most of the cost to the local community. So your partner, the local community, must pay for something they didn't ask for.

When those funds are lost, the local community is faced with a dilemma – cut costs – which means reduce QUALITY – or raise local taxes. What choice would you make?

By shifting the funding burden to property taxes, deduction funding increases funding inequality.

My school district is now on the ballot to fill the \$7million hole created by the voucher costs that the deduction system passes on to our local budget. It is a steep climb to win. Passage will be a real burden for those on fixed or limited income. Not passing it will be a catastrophe for our students.

All outcomes have implications for the viability of our community. The success of any community depends on it being appealing to present and future residents. Both taxes and education are powerful forces in that appeal.

I am a veteran of numerous levy campaigns. I bet you are too. While they provide an opportunity to hold up the value of our public schools, to tell their story, and rally our community in support of our youth and our future, they are also difficult. They are expensive, time consuming, but worst of all – divisive. Pushing this expense on to our community is dividing us.

Our community prides itself in offering our students real opportunities. We hope that is what the legislature wants for our students too.

Be a good partner. End performance-based vouchers, end the deduction method of funding education options, and focus on ways to improve opportunity in our public schools, and strengthen our public system.