

My name is Amy Barker. I am a preschool teacher at Immanuel Lutheran School in Hamilton, Ohio. Previously, I have also taught as a preschool teacher at Evendale Elementary School in Cincinnati, Ohio, as a Head Start preschool teacher at Montgomery Elementary in Cincinnati, Ohio, and as a third grade teacher at Horizon Science Academy Dayton Elementary School (a charter school in Dayton, Ohio). I can offer a unique perspective because I have seen education through the lens of public schools, charter schools, and private schools. Based on my personal experience as an educator, I can attest that every child is different. One type of school cannot meet the needs of each individual student. Many students thrive in public schools and that is great. However, that does not mean that all students perform best in these schools. Some do better in private schools or charter schools. Families should have the opportunity to choose an alternative school that aligns with their personal values and best fits the needs of their children.

I have heard many people claiming to be for school choice, but against public funding for private institutions. Is it really school choice if the choice is not financially feasible for all families? Even with increasing the income requirement on the income-based EdChoice scholarship, there are still a large number of families who make too much money to qualify for a scholarship, but not enough to afford tuition for their children. What about those families? Why is it acceptable that other families can have true school choice, but the middle-class families cannot simply because they are not “poor enough”? Every family should have the right and the opportunity to make educational decisions about their children.

Over half of the families at Immanuel utilize EdChoice scholarships so that their children can attend our school. Many more families in the community and many of the preschool families (whose children will be entering kindergarten next year) would be able to benefit from an expansion in EdChoice. The majority of the preschool families would like to stay at Immanuel for kindergarten next year, however, many have expressed to me that they are unable to afford the tuition. These families have grown to love Immanuel from their time here for preschool. They see the loving, caring, and family-like environment that Immanuel has to offer and wish their children could continue their education here. I am here today to advocate for these families.

Many of the preschool families at my school have made life decisions based on the new list of failing schools that was released in November. These families were told that their children would be able to receive the EdChoice scholarship when entering kindergarten next school year based on their assigned school being added to the failing list. It is both unfair and wrong to take back the promise made to these families. If the government is unable to follow through, then the list should not have been made public in November. This issue should have been resolved prior to releasing the new list. However, since this was not the order of events, I believe that the government has the responsibility to keep its promise to these families. Period.

If it is decided that new criteria should be used to determine failing schools, fine. Fix that in the future. For now, honor the promise made to Ohio families in November. Incoming kindergarten students for the 2020-2021 school year should not be impacted by the government's failure to resolve these concerns prior to releasing the failing schools list in November. Follow through with your promise for families for this coming school year and then find a solution that can be agreed upon for rating these schools in future years.

I can think of a few of my students specifically who have been impacted by these recent events. For instance, I have one boy in my preschool class who will be transitioning to kindergarten next school year at another private school in the area. When his family discovered that his assigned school was recently added to the failing list, they were relieved because they knew they could send him to private school. Without this scholarship, they were unsure if they would be able to afford the tuition there, even though the private school is their primary choice for him. Now, there is a distinct possibility that this opportunity could be taken away from this child and his family. How horrible is that for them? They believed that they would have the resources based on this program and now they are unsure of what the future will hold for their child. It is unfair to them to take away that opportunity after promising it to them previously. The government needs to follow through on the promise it made to Ohio families in November.

I have another student in my preschool class who will also be moving onto kindergarten next school year. He has a summer birthday and his family considered sending him to kindergarten this school year. They decided that a year of preschool first would be better for him. Now, they are worried that they made the wrong choice because of the uncertainty surrounding EdChoice scholarships. How devastating is that for them? If they are unable to receive this scholarship for their child next school year, then they will believe that they made the worst decision of their lives to hold him back from kindergarten for one year. They were relying on this scholarship for their son's educational future. Again, I will say: the government needs to follow through on the promise it made to Ohio families in November.

There are so many other children at my school who are transitioning to kindergarten next school year and could benefit from the EdChoice scholarship. Numerous families have commented to me that they would like to stay here at Immanuel if only they could afford it. So many thought that they would be able to continue their child's education here after the new failing list was released in November. So many were disappointed when they found out that promise might be taken back. Taking back this promise is wrong and unfair. Taking back this promise is failing to support Ohio families. Not all children thrive in the public school setting. Families should not be forced to attend the public school they are assigned to simply because they cannot afford to move or cannot afford tuition at a private school. Families need options. Children need options. These options breed competition, which will lead to improvement in all schools—public, private, and charter. This improvement will help to close the achievement gap and level the playing field so that all students can reach their full potentials.

I appreciate your time today. I believe that we all need to work together to provide the best education possible for the students in Ohio. We should support families to make the choice that is best for them, whether that is public school, private school, charter school, or homeschooling. Every family should have that choice and should have access to financial means to make that choice possible. This is the only way to truly level the playing field and close the achievement gap so that all students can be successful both inside and outside of the classroom. You have the power today to help make that a reality.

Thank you.