

**Testimony on EdChoice Vouchers**

**HB 9 Conference Committee**

**Monday, February 17, 2020**

**Colleen O'Connell, Teacher in Reynoldsburg City Schools District**

Chairman Jones and Members of the Conference Committee,

I teach to help students realize their inherent value and potential as they grow as real problem solvers, developing their unique skills to create a better future for not just themselves but for all. I come here today as someone who is able to understand many, if not all, sides of this issue. From pre-school to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I was myself not only a Catholic school student, but a student from a family who regularly struggled to make ends meet and lived in a home that rarely felt like a safe place to be. Some of my family members were or are still Catholic school educators. I also stand before you a proud graduate of one of Kentucky's excellent public schools—Lloyd Memorial High School in the Greater Cincinnati area and, most importantly, as a current proud public-school educator in Reynoldsburg City Schools. My experience in public school changed and may have even saved my life. It empowered me to be proud of who I am and to see my potential to lead in the real world.

That's why, when as an adult comfortably working at the University of Cincinnati, I realized that I wanted a job with more purpose and impact to put my values to work in the world, I decided to become a teacher. Whether I would teach in a private or public school was never a question for me. I wanted to help create more equitable opportunities for students who may have circumstances like I once did, whether that meant helping students with a family struggling to put food on the table, students living in abusive homes, with mental health needs, living closeted due to their religious upbringing, or students simply not realizing their full potential or having faith in their possibilities in comparison to more privileged peers. I wanted the support I could offer to be available to ALL students, just as it was available to me the day I convinced my mom to take me to enroll in my local public school during my sophomore year of high school.

As a child with divorced parents, my mother had custody, and my stepfather made my home a scary place to be. I lived for the weekends with my grandparents, my dad, and my aunts and uncles. During the week, school was the safest and most consistent place in my day, and, therefore, my favorite place to be. However, it was not always a place that made me feel good about myself or my potential. In comparison to my peers with advantages and higher income, I frequently felt that there was no bridge between their lives and my own. While my teachers at Catholic schools certainly cared and offered so much of themselves, I often felt pitied and judged by them for being poorer than my peers. Not all the opportunities offered were available to me because they required extra money or parental time and energy. I still remember trying to hide my lunch tokens because as the only free lunch student in my class mine were a different color than the rest of my classmates' tokens. While I know this was not their intention, my teachers' and fellow students' families' ignorance of the reality of poverty sent the consistent message that I was a pitiful charity case lucky just to be around my peers, and that my family was less valuable and valid due to our circumstances. It should be no surprise, then, that while I worked hard and wanted to make a better life for myself, I believed that my possibilities could not possibly rival those of my "better" peers.

For this reason, I still consider my first day in my public school to be the turning point in my life. Immediately, I was surrounded by peers with intersecting circumstance, and for the first time ever in my life, my school made me feel that my possibilities were boundless. My AP US History and Government teacher even pulled me aside once to ask why I was constantly so self-deprecating and why my confidence did not match my abilities and my potential. I still have a paper saved that from my AP English teacher with a comment that while the paper was an

A and excellent in comparison to other students my age, that I could do better and he would push me to grow even more. “Consider me your personal pain in the butt” it read, and he delivered...helping me grow as a writer (sometimes despite my desire to take it easy even once). I finally had a guidance counselor who not only made me feel unashamed of my circumstances but that helped me learn how to move from my reality to my possibilities. I had teachers trained in innovative pedagogy who created experiential learning, including getting to be a campaign manager in a mock election in 2004 to parallel the presidential election, researching issues and executive power, hiring classmates for the “campaign,” discussing strategy, making commercials, and even having our teacher arrange for our debate to be aired on our local public access channel, KET. In fact, my passion and love for civic engagement and the democratic process can be solely traced back to my experience in our public schools. It is because of the extracurricular opportunities and support offered at my public school and the potential those teachers saw in me (potential my Catholic school teachers never addressed) that I was able to attend college with a full scholarship. Most importantly, it is because of my public-school experience that I chose to educate.

Now, I teach 5<sup>th</sup> grade Social Studies and Language Arts at STEM Middle at Baldwin Road Junior High in Reynoldsburg City Schools, and I can say that I could not be more proud of the work we do with our students to provide them with unparalleled opportunities to innovate and problem solve. While I sat here on Thursday evening and Friday morning on my conference comp day, I listened to EdChoice advocates detail to you the real people they represent impacted by these policies and listened as they maligned the quality and rigor of our public schools or even spoke with fear or disgust about students like mine—students who are every bit as loved and deserving as their students. As I listened, I couldn’t help but think of the people I know who represent the 90% of Ohio’s students in our truly excellent public schools who are impacted by funding losses to vouchers and cannot suffer any more loss of funds. So, here is a little information about these extraordinary people.

First, there are the staff: Because my building is focused on transdisciplinary problem based learning, learning that, like life, crosses disciplines to solve authentic problems, our entire staff have put in extra unpaid time to be well-trained in these teaching methods. My co-workers and I also put in significant time to help make happen our signature events in which we build authentic connection with family and community. One co-worker and I came in during our unpaid time over Christmas break to create flipped classroom videos to help students by making small group guided lessons available whenever they need it, whether they’re absent, are working from home, or simply want to refresh their memory over strategies we practiced that day. I also have the honor of working with Ohio’s 2020 District 9 Teacher of the Year and one of the state finalists for Ohio Teacher of the Year who leads our Sustainable Outdoor Innovation Learning (SOIL) Lab. Through his expertise, our students have access to an environmental science curriculum that is literally only available in our building because one excellent public school educator has put in time and energy to plan, collaborate, and write many, many grants to make these experiences available, not to mention the time he takes to help foster pedagogical excellence by supporting all the other teachers in our building because he cares that much about providing an excellent education to our students in all content areas and grade levels. I also work with a first year teacher who graduated from our district, and on the day she got her purple REA shirt, she told me it was one of the most exciting days of her life because, I quote, “This is the same shirt my heroes wore when I was in school.”

Then, there are our extraordinary students and their families. Reynoldsburg’s families are invested and active in their children’s schools. I cannot count the number of times in my three years of teaching that a parent has offered their assistance, partnered with me to help their child, or volunteered to help others. I’ve never had a parent-teacher conference night that wasn’t full, despite the fact that I know some parents had to rearrange their schedules, likely with difficulty, to make it to school on that particular day and timeslot. Furthermore, I take pride in knowing that my students’ parents literally lead our district and Reynoldsburg city itself by running for multiple offices, serving as part of the Board of Education, being elected mayor, or serving as the nation’s first elected Nepali-Bhutanese official on Reynoldsburg City council. My students mirror this vigorous involvement

and civic engagement with their inquiry into issues in their community and the world and their passion for making our world a better place, starting first with our schools. Before I became a teacher, I spent a lot of time worrying about who would be leading our future. Now, as a public-school teacher, I've never been more confident that, as long as we provide *them* what *they* need along the way, our children are more than ready to lead a more just, beautiful future.

Despite all the excellence I'm surrounded with in the people in my school, inadequate funding already impacts my students. I keep a tool kit in my classroom to repair things that might start to fall apart throughout the year; I have a deal with the night janitor where he looks through his sweeping piles and gathers up any supplies like pencils, pens, etc. he finds for me and I give him a Diet Coke in return every now and then. In the teacher work room, the ceiling tiles caved in once earlier this year in one spot...we just worked around it. On Wednesday of last week, I used my last paper towel in my room and didn't have time to stop and buy more for my classroom before coming to work the next morning. Naturally, this meant that a student had a small spill on Thursday. I had to borrow from another teacher, and while I sent a student to that teacher with a note that jokingly said, "Help me Mr. H...you're my only hope!" the truth is that teachers depending on ourselves and each other to provide supplies *is* frequently the only hope that we can ensure we have what our children need without taking money from our already strapped building and district budget or asking parents to dip again into their own pockets. These anecdotes don't even begin to touch on how much our students are directly impacted by not having lower ratios in staff to student whether we're considering teachers, nurses, paraprofessionals, security, social workers and counselors...As a rapidly growing district with capped funding, I shudder to think of where the money could come from next if the legislature allows the flawed, misleading state report card to continue to dictate much of EdChoice eligibility.

However, I think the most important point to remember is that we need to keep public funds—local taxpayer dollars—in local public schools that educate *all* children. On Friday, when EdChoice advocates were asked questions about whether they're able to deny students admission or access to education on the basis of disability, they had to answer that they do. One advocate in particular mentioned that it wouldn't be fair to admit these students knowing that they couldn't financially provide what the student needed. Some EdChoice advocates have also lamented their inability to plan fiscally for their upcoming school year due to the uncertainty of funding available to them. To that, I simply say, "Welcome to providing a public good based on publicly available funds." Whether or not we have the funds available to help our students and to meet their specific needs, public schools turn away no students. When needed, our schools make cuts elsewhere to make sure we can bring in and educate *every* child enrolled in our districts. Often, the cuts made in some way, shape, or form adversely impact the education of those same children. If private schools want to accept money from the same source as public schools, they should be prepared to make the same difficult choices as public schools. As someone raised with Catholic values, it astounds and appalls me to see families and people of faith advocate to pull the rug out from under the majority of students to give an advantage to a few.

One of my students this year wants to become a teacher when she grows up. She is extremely talented and unusually driven for a fifth grader, and should this be her calling, she will be an extraordinary teacher. However, I worry what the state and sustainability of public education will be when she is an adult due to the constant cherry picking of our funds. For her, for her classmates, for the 90% of Ohio's children who will help create the future of our great state, I ask you to act to stop the bleed on local district budgets to the EdChoice voucher program.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for your consideration. I am available to respond to any questions you may have.