

Testimony for HB 9 Conference Committee      February 17, 2020

Given by David Heflinger      Superintendent, Field Local Schools

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 Dave Heflinger, superintendent of the Field Local Schools.

The Field school district is an amazing place. We refer to ourselves as the "Field Family". That term encompasses everyone in our district. We are a district of approximately 2000 students, located just south of Kent, Ohio. In May of 2019, we passed the first new operating money in 28 years. Financially, we were at the end of the line. We made cuts, we stretched resources, and our staff bent over backwards to give our students a first-class education while pinching pennies. Our community rewarded those efforts with new money. We now hope to be on solid ground, financially, for the next six to seven years.

With the budget stabilized, we have been able to restore many items that had been reduced or eliminated. We have added electives and expanded our core offerings. We are making needed repairs to our aging middle and high school buildings. We are starting a program to replace curriculum items for one subject each year. Most importantly, we have been able to expand the number of guidance counselors in the district. The Field Schools are moving forward, and we have the support of our students and families.

When we learned about the EdChoice expansion in the budget, we became very concerned. Suddenly, our high school and one of our two elementary buildings were considered "failing schools". I believe it is dangerous to label a school as failing, not because the performance of the school has changed, but because the formula to determine failing has changed. I have been engaged with the process over the past few months to encourage a change to the EdChoice Voucher process. I want to thank everyone for delaying the implementation. Now we need a permanent solution.

An expansion of those eligible for EdChoice Vouchers can have many unintended consequences for my district. It took us many years to pass new operating money. We were on the brink of financial ruin for several years. Now we are moving forward, and we do not need a roadblock to our momentum. An expansion of the voucher program creates financial insecurity. How many students would take advantage of the expanded program? We have no way of knowing. I do know that people in our district were concerned that immediately after passing a levy, two schools were labeled as failing. They were, rightfully, concerned. I have explained what has happened and I believe most people do not think our schools are really failing. But this process creates doubt about our district. If that doubt causes people to take advantage of the EdChoice Voucher program, we lose money. If we lose enough money, our momentum will stall, and we will have to delay purchasing staff and programs that our students need. I can not go back to my community, after finally passing a levy, and tell them the money is not going to carry us as far as we thought. I can not tell them their taxes have increased, but we still can not deliver the programs our students need.

As a public school leader, all children in my district are my responsibility. Whether they attend my schools, or attend a private school, or open enroll to another public school, they are my responsibility. I

feel this way because any child living in my district can attend my schools any time they want. That is their right and it is my responsibility to provide each of them the best education possible. I do not get to pick my students. I have many students who come from middle-class homes and are ready to learn. These students move through their education as expected. Certainly some have needs or struggles along the way, and we are there to help them. Most, however, progress through their education and graduate without serious concerns.

I also have many other students who arrive with many issues. They have a variety of mental health issues and require a more intense level of attention from teachers and counselors. We have students demonstrating very serious mental health issues at very young ages. This is happening in far more cases than it was just 10 years ago. We dedicate ourselves to helping all of these students find success and reach their potential. We do not get to decline any student who lives in our district, no matter the level of intervention they require. I believe it is simply wrong to take money designated to serve our students and send it to a private school, a school that is not required to educate all students and who can pick and choose who is admitted.

I understand people have many different beliefs about choice as it relates to education. As a public school superintendent, the only choice I have is to provide an outstanding education to every one of my students. I need every dollar I have to continue to honor that responsibility.

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.