

Chairman Jones, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the Conference Committee of House Bill 9, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on House Bill 9. My name is Liz Kirby and I am the Superintendent of the Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District.

I have been the Superintendent in CH-UH for about six months. Having spent most of my educational career in Chicago, I had to quickly learn the workings of school funding in a state that not only funds its public schools through local tax levies, but also siphons state funds meant for public schools, into private school tuition vouchers. I am still sorting through State Report Card data, trying to figure out how our district can hit an ever-moving target in order to escape the label of “poor-performing”, a label that in no way represents the education that our students are receiving. In fact, the State Report Card appears to be designed to set up a system where eventually all schools could be labeled failing.

Maybe all of this seems perfectly normal to long-time Ohioans who have become desensitized, or have turned a blind eye to this absurdity. But for me, I am still in shock that this is the reality we are facing.

You heard from the CH-UH Board of Education president and vice president last week about the financial damage that the EdChoice funding model is causing our district. In the state of Ohio, the children of my district are giving up the highest percentage of their state funding to pay for other children’s private tuition via EdChoice. This year alone, more than 7 million dollars (a third of our state funding) has been deducted from our budget to pay for private school tuition. This is not sustainable.

A little more than 1,400 students who live in our district are using the EdChoice voucher. 94% of those students have attended our schools. This indicates that many of these students were not fleeing a failing school. They never intended on attending public school regardless what grade we receive on the state report card. CH-UH is not losing students - we are just losing money.

Our district will ask our community for a levy in three weeks. If it weren’t for EdChoice, we would not have to ask our community for a levy until 2023. And even then, the millage we would have to ask for would be significantly less. This levy is beginning to divide our community in ways I’ve never seen before. We are in a terrible position of having to ask an already over-taxed community for more money, even after committing to yearly budget cuts and overall fiscal responsibility that has earned us numerous accolades.

As you consider House Bill 9 and work with your Senate colleagues to reconcile with the bill they are proposing in Senate Bill 89, I respectfully ask you to please consider these four factors:

1. Performance-based EdChoice vouchers make it extremely difficult for public school districts to plan and budget. I ask you to please transition 100% of vouchers to income-based so EdChoice vouchers are funded from state funds directly. Do not deduct funds from local school districts.

2. I realize the state needs to be able to plan and budget as well. If you need to phase in Income-based vouchers over time, please eliminate any clauses that would guarantee performance-based vouchers to the siblings of children who currently receive a voucher. Once again, this language makes it nearly impossible for public school districts to plan and budget. Guaranteeing performance-based vouchers to students who currently use them already ensures the drain of money from public schools for 12 more years until the 2032-33 school year.

3. Please reinstate the requirement that a high school student who takes a voucher must first have attended a public school.

4. I thank our legislators, especially Speaker of the House Larry Householder, who finally acknowledge that our state report card system is inherently flawed. I'm asking you to correct the damage these report cards have inflicted on local communities. Please reimburse districts for voucher costs we've incurred due to the unvetted expansion that occurred in this year's biennial budgeting process.

I came to CH-UH to lead an already amazing group of students, staff and families into even greater levels of achievement. But I will tell you that I am growing increasingly bitter that even **some** of my attention and energy has been diverted away from that mission, and into activism against an unjust system that should have never gotten so out of hand. This must be fixed. Not only is our district at risk, the state of Ohio is at risk.

Thank you for listening.