

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you for affording me the opportunity to speak with you today regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program. My name is Ellen Hart. I am a 5th grade Language Arts and Social Studies teacher in the Middletown City School District. I am also a proud class of 2015 graduate of Middletown High School.

Less than 5 years ago, I was a student in the public school district that I have the privilege to teach in today. Throughout my time in my school district, I was given opportunities that I otherwise would not have been able to afford. I am the daughter of a single mother, who would not have been able to send me to a private school even if the HB 9 Voucher program had been introduced at the time. We could not have afforded any extra costs. If the EdChoice voucher program continues to be funded from a failing schools approach, I am gravely concerned for the students in my district and students in failing schools across Ohio. The current EdChoice program creates a larger inequity gap than currently exists, and the poorest students in the district, those who the program aims to assist, are, in reality, the ones it fails the most. This entirely undercuts the goal of the program.

We are all here for the same reason, to push for an equitable education for all students. This is what our kids deserve; what my students deserve. How can we pass HB 9 and whole-heartedly believe that this is the best option for our students?

Students who need this most could still not afford a private school education under this voucher expansion. They will be left behind in their public school, which would be grossly underfunded if HB 9 passes. I am in favor of a reform of the voucher program with an income-based approach that prioritizes our poorest students. A program that does not use local tax dollars that are meant for the public school. If this is truly about an equitable education system, and not an attack on failing public schools who educate the poorest students in those districts, I encourage a shift in the voucher program, from the failing schools approach, to an income-based approach, that is federally funded.

The current report card system is flawed, and not a true representation of the growth being made within school districts, my own district, for example. At my school, we meet every week as a building to discuss high quality data measures, and how we can continue to grow our building based on that data. We are focused on pushing our students as far as they'll go, no matter their background or ability. Due to the push of state and federal testing, which has completely taken on a life of its own, we are constantly held to a standard that private schools are not. Our schools in turn become a failing school, when in reality growth is being made. I believe with everything in me that the Middletown City School District is not a failing district no matter what the state says. The energy, growth, and pride of the district is unmatched. The STEAM- science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics facilities and programs that are offered are state-of-the art. Something that would not be possible to fund for our students if our district took the financial hit that EdChoice expanded vouchers would create. Our district is preparing students for a successful future, just like it did for myself only 5 years ago. We need our local taxes to continue to do so.

Additionally, private schools could turn away a student for a multitude of reasons, whether that be a student's ability/disability level, income level, exhibited behaviors or record of past behaviors. The list could go on. Public schools do not have the option to turn away students. Public schools take on students-baggage and all, and I am proud of that. With that being said, the HB 9 voucher proposal will financially devastate public schools, and the students that get left behind, because private schools will not accept them, or because student's families can simply not afford the private school will be the ones directly impacted, creating an enormous gap of inequity in Ohio.

In my Language Arts classroom, the students possess a multitude of abilities. I teach two classes, with 26 students in each section. A total of 52 students. At the lowest, I have a student reading at a 2nd grade reading level. At the highest level, I have students who are performing at a 7th-8th grade reading level, and I am constantly looking for ways to challenge them. I have students with autism, students with ADHD, students with anxiety and/or depression, students who live in poverty, students who have moms and dads in jail, students who live with their grandparents because their own parents cannot care for them, and students with sickly parents. Let me remind you that they are only in 5th grade. Despite the everyday challenges my students face, we are held accountable, as we should be. The money afforded to us by local tax dollars helps us provide an individualized high quality education to students no matter their level or background. If that funding were to be cut via HB 9, the same students who the program aims to help will be the ones ultimately left behind. Remember, I am a product of a failing public school. I am here, speaking with you all, fully equipt with the tools to have a successful career and contribution to society.

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.