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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 Eric Smola, superintendent of Evergreen Local Schools.

I am speaking not because I oppose school choice, but because I strongly disagree with the proposed changes to EdChoice that will expand the program to include strong schools, while not helping the children it is intended to benefit. Who am I? How do I know? I know because I am a parent who has taken advantage of the voucher program for seven years for my own daughter, as well as held two administrative positions in Catholic schools in which I limited admission requirements in order to ensure the best students gained entrance into the schools I was responsible for leading. Today, I am the superintendent for an Ohio public school district who is *not* currently at risk of losing thousands of taxpayer dollars if these revisions are approved, yet I fully believe the proposed changes to EdChoice are an injustice to all public schools. As a result of my experiences with EdChoice, I feel strongly that the changes to the current program are unjust and will not provide the desired results.

The first year EdChoice vouchers were introduced in 2005, I was serving as the principal of Rosary Cathedral Elementary School located within the Toledo Public School System. At this time, Rosary Cathedral School, made up of grades PreK-8, was on the verge of closing due to low enrollment and lack of private tuition dollars needed to sustain it. Lucky for the school, TPS had schools labeled as “failing” and families were now armed with vouchers to find educational opportunities elsewhere. Many of those families turned to Rosary Cathedral School as an option. Over 400 students applied to attend Rosary Cathedral that year, but it was impossible and undesirable for us to accommodate such a large number. As a Catholic school, Rosary Cathedral did not have the space for these students nor the resources necessary to provide special education services as well as the mental and emotional supports needed for some students. To place Rosary Cathedral in the best possible position, I single-handedly rewrote the student handbook to include the following accepted transfer student qualifications: transfer students must have a C average or better academically, satisfactory behavior record, and less than 10 absences in one year. These admission rules immediately took our number of applicants from 400 to less than 200 – more than half of the students were eliminated immediately because they couldn’t meet these three basic qualifications! It had nothing to do with which students financially needed a spot the most; it was about which students would make our school perform the best. I was able to select the top students to attend Rosary Cathedral, fill all of my vacant seats, and generate more than enough tuition revenue, over two-million dollars, to run the school which was being paid for by funds which would have gone to Toledo Public Schools!

From 2008 until 2018, I served as the principal of St. Francis de Sales School, located in Toledo, serving male students and their families in grades 7-12. Every single student who attends must apply and be admitted...and guess who had the sole discretion of admitting those students based upon school policy.

As principal, we only admitted the highest performers, best contributors, and those families who could potentially pay the difference between the EdChoice voucher and the price of tuition. This left average students, students with special needs, and those who performed below average, or even failed state tests with no place to go but their home public districts, and the public schools cannot afford this reality. No one wants to admit it, but it's true, and I can attest to the potential injustice and deficiencies of the EdChoice voucher system.

Now, if EdChoice is expanded as it is being proposed, the number of students eligible will be so great, private schools will in no way be able to accommodate the large masses, but I guarantee they will be able to recruit and make room for the top students! The same top students who would have made their public school's report card shine with high marks and accolades. The kids who truly need the help from their failing public school districts and who should be receiving income-based EdChoice scholarships will again be shut out! And money will be taken away from their public schools in the process, negatively impacting budgets and services that these students should have been receiving all along. We are setting many of our kids up to fail, and you – our lawmakers, will be allowing it to happen!

I am all for giving our students and their families a choice for their education, but this notion that we are somehow leveling the playing field for each child by awarding EdChoice scholarships is blatantly false. These income-challenged families will have no choice but to continue attending their failing school districts where there is no money to provide them with the resources and facilities they need to be successful. Stop pitting one student against another, public school against private school, admissions requirements versus accept-all policies. Right now, you have the choice to put our students first and ensure their success – decline the changes proposed to Ohio's EdChoice program and support SB89.

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.