

Chairman Jones, members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, all parties herein gathered, and all others who may hear or read this testimony:

Thank you for this opportunity to come before you to present testimony concerning HB 9 and school choice in Ohio. I greatly appreciate this afforded blessing and hope to present a multifaceted perspective on this very important issue. My background consists of teaching in three different small private schools along the Ohio River in Eastern Ohio, amounting to thirteen total years during which I have primarily been a high school mathematics teacher. In addition, I have served in local politics for the past six-plus years as an independent councilman for my home village of Mingo Junction in Jefferson County, as well as serving on local boards and being involved with local charitable organizations. Not only this, but I am also a preacher for a local congregation of the area.

In this rather brief statement, I intend to state that there is value in private school education, there are problems with our current systems, and EdChoice is a necessary component of the solution to our state's education systemic issues.

The perspective which I give is one from the trenches, so to speak. In this, I wish to begin in refutation of some of the comments which I read and hear from others about the value of private schools. The small private schools where I have been blessed to teach provide an opportunity for many students to achieve that which they were not able to do in a public school. These students found that their private school education provided a rigor and a challenge that they needed in addition to a welcoming environment with more individualized care and concern which they earnestly sought. These schools provide a wonderful product worthy of investment at a cost far less than the cost per pupil of a public school.

To look at this issue as public vs private schooling is a misnomer. As someone from a private school, I wish no harm to government schools. In many ways, government schools and private schools battle together. I have been a part of many discussions with individuals from government schools pertaining to our joint disdain for our current state standards, the end-of-course exams, licensing procedures, etc. Neither are we nor should we be viewed as adversaries. We are, at times, competitors, but we seek the same goals for the communities we serve and the society we jointly create.

As far as this year, the timeline is very short. The problems with the government school rating system and the EdChoice program were known many months in advance of February 1<sup>st</sup>, which was the opening date for applications. I will not waste time discussing them in any depth. In short, the system of grading schools is beyond complex and utterly confusing to the general public. Plus, it likely does give unfair ratings to many schools. Are there failing schools? Yes. Should there be some metric of this with corresponding consequences? Yes. Does our current system do that? Well... it tries.

Changes were made hours before the opening date of February 1st and continue to be debated at this hour. Changing the system now, when parents have already planned, budgeted, and worked to provide the education which they desire their children to have... and changing the system to deny them the option(s) which they were told they would have is unjust. I encourage the committee to maintain the program for this year either as originally announced with the additional failing schools, or at least the same schools as last year. The most important thing going forward, though, is to modify the entire system back to square one. Testing needs reviewed and changed. Our graduation pathways need reviewed and changed. Standards need reviewed and changed. Overall, our system in our state needs to be less restrictive and opened up to allow for innovation and creation.

The solutions to what we all seek lies in choice and local autonomy. Empower parents with the ability to choose where their children should be educated. Incentives should be set in this manner.

Our state is heading for an eventual crossroads of ideology. The question which must be answered is whether public education funding should be used to support government institutions or to support the education of the public. Personally, I think it should be to educate the public. I think we all would generally agree with that.

My thought is this: any family which would rather send a student to a private school rather than the school ran by the district in which they happen to reside should be afforded that opportunity with any state funds going along with that student. It should be analogous to open enrollment of students from one government school district to another.

Our state's EdChoice program should not be based on a family's income. Ideally, it should be based on the cost to educate. To re-start our program, I would suggest beginning with the amount of money from the state that goes to the governmental school districts. That should follow a student wherever he or she may choose to receive education. When we go to have lunch, we are not asked our income and told to pay a different price. When we go to buy a car, we are not asked about our income and told to pay a different price. Neither should we be told to pay a different out of pocket price for elementary or secondary education simply because of our household income.

It would be a tax rebate. To call it a voucher is a misnomer. The public is paying for education in the form of taxes. Why should parents pay for education twice: to the government school their children do not attend and then for tuition to the school which actually educates their children?

Additionally, this for-all EdChoice program could give the money in the form of a card, like the Direction/EBT card, to each family. The family would then choose which school, in the entire state, would receive the money. The state would not fund any specific schools. It would distribute its education funding equally to its students for their education.

School choice will assuredly lead to needed innovation in our state’s education system, if we allow schools to compete and if we remove some of the burdensome restrictions and “standards.” The net result will be better private schools and better government schools.

In summary, please pursue status quo for this application period and consider a single state-wide school choice program that is equitable to all individuals regardless of where they live or what their income is.

I once again thank you for affording me this opportunity to come before you. May God bless you all at this most important time with wisdom and clarity to couple with your concern in your decision making. Chairman Jones, should you or anyone here from your committee have any questions for me, I am happy to respond to the best of my ability and knowledge.

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