

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding Ohio's Ed Choice Voucher program. My name is Irshad Bannister. I am the school board president of Washington Local Schools in Toledo.

I have spent much of my weekend reading over previous testimony given to this committee on both sides of this issue in hopes to not be too repetitive with my time here today. You have heard the word "capped" from many public school representatives over the last few days so it would probably be repetitive for me to talk extensively about the 2,000 students in Washington Local who don't receive \$1 of state aid. Many districts have shared with you the average per pupil aid they do receive in relation to the amount of the Ed Choice voucher that gets deducted from their revenue. If your curious, ours is around \$4,000 even though the Ed Choice voucher that gets deducted for high school students is \$6,000. You've heard from superintendents about the cost to educate children on IEP's, children with hearing or vision challenges, emotionally disturbed, and autism, and how they are proud to serve these students daily. The cost to educate even one of these cases could cost the district six figures a year. You are aware that many of these students would be denied from a private school opportunity.

I also spent time reading the testimonies of individuals encouraging the expansion of Ed Choice. You have heard similar and repetitive points on this side as well. They feel they give the student a more well-rounded form education that's grounded on religious principles and biblical teachings. They feel they have a safer environment and that they give the financially challenged, many times urban, family an opportunity at a better education than their public school option. You've heard stories about families in limbo, that were expecting this scholarship and now the academic future of their student is on hold awaiting the outcome of our current situation. Stories such as the one told by the superintendent of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Toledo, of the 8<sup>th</sup> grader who's been accepted to St. John's Jesuit in Toledo but isn't sure if the Ed Choice voucher will be available.

Committee members, I have two confessions for you today. The first one is that I am a devout Christian. I believe in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and like many of my public school colleagues that I have spoken with if a parent feels that learning the good news of the gospel is essential to their version of a well rounded education then they should have the choice to obtain that education whenever and wherever they see fit. This debate is not about a parent's right to choose. It's about who will be obligated and responsible for providing the resources for that choice.

Confession number two. I've been a public servant for a whopping 48 days. I've spent my adult life as a business owner in the financial industry and ran for school board to help develop solutions to the many challenges we face in the school district that I grew up in and that my four children currently attend. It wasn't until the campaigning process, and now as my role as a current board member, that I have come to realize that some of our most threatening challenges originated beyond the borders of our district. The Ed Choice voucher program in its current form is a threat to the viability of our district and public schools all across Ohio, which is what brought me in front of you today.

I had a mentor years ago that used to tell me, "Irshad, what we do is simple but it's not easy." What he meant was the basic concept of our business of teaching families how to save more and spend less or offering businesses solutions to make them more financially efficient is not brain surgery. But building a business from scratch is not easy. Starting as a young, single, black, twenty-five year old, in an industry dominated by men who do not look like me, and sitting in front of majority white clients in their 40's, 50's, or 60's and expecting longevity and success in my career was highly improbable and by definition

not easy. I didn't get in my profession because I thought it would be easy. I would also assume that you did not choose to sit where you are sitting today because you thought the issues that would come before you would be easy. But I would like to humbly argue that, like my profession, the solution to this Ed Choice argument is very simple, even though the process of achieving the necessary result that is in the best interest of all, is incredibly difficult. Here are a few simple solutions that could be taken:

- Remove the cap and end the unconstitutional funding practice of public schools. If a child's education is worth \$6,000 at a private school it should be worth \$6,000 at a public school. Give Washington Local the \$14,000,000 that we currently aren't receiving due to this cap according to the state's own formula.
- Stop deducting Ed Choice vouchers from local school districts. Another confession for me is that prior to getting involved in school district politics I didn't know who my state representative was. State representative Lisa Sobecki has been a great resource and advocate for us. I didn't know who my state senator was either. I have since learned about the great work Senator Theresa Fedor has done in her advocacy of public school education. For me this body has operated in the political shadows, with very little risk of running into them at the neighborhood grocery store like our local and city representatives and aren't on the nightly news, CNN, Fox News, or MSNBC like our national leaders. You created legislation that I believe was noble in its attempt to help kids that grew up like me, get an opportunity at the best education their parents could find. But instead of owning the responsibility of the legislation, the buck was passed to local districts, and thus the state legislators decided to stay in the shadows, requiring these districts to issue levies on their local tax payers to finance your legislation. Simply put, this is your noble cause that you as a body have decided to take on so please also take on the responsibility of financing it.
- Hold all stakeholders who receive public dollars equitably accountable. Our district treasurer has to adhere to an audit consistently to insure that every I is dotted and T is crossed when it comes to how public resources are spent. I wonder if the Toledo Catholic Diocese or any other private institution that receives government funds would be open to sharing how they are spending their resources with the public. Force us to use the same standardized testing so that we can have a true apples to apples comparison of our academic achievements. And limit private schools ability to discard students and exile them if the student is not living up to their "standards". The superintendent of the catholic diocese shared a story with you about a student from a private institution in Toledo. What doesn't surprised me is that he didn't share the one about the student from that institution who received a voucher, but was eventually kicked out of the school for not being able to pay the balance of his tuition above the voucher scholarship. That student is back in Washington Local and at risk of not graduating because the private school is currently withholding their transcripts.

It is my belief the solution to the issue before you today is very simple. The following course of action that will be needed to implement and offer resources to solve the problem, I know, is anything but easy. I ask of all of you and the rest of our state legislatures to do what we all know is hard. Stand up and own this issue and do what's best for the education of all of Ohio's children.

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide input regarding Ohio's Ed Choice Voucher Program. I am happy to address your questions. Thank you