

What's our Vision for Educating Ohio's Children?

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 Dr. John Kellogg, superintendent of Westerville City Schools.

I would like to focus my testimony today around the question "What's our vision for educating Ohio's children?".

Leaders are expected to provide a vision that clearly articulates the desired future. The purpose of policy is to drive the system towards that vision through goals and strategies.

The current state of public school policy in Ohio has some important elements that are unclear and even misleading in regard to a clear vision for educating Ohio's children. Let's consider some of those public policy issues.

First, Ohio maintains a public school accountability system based on local report card data which, as many state leaders have cited, lacks in regard to accuracy, reliability, and validity. That's why the issue of the local report card is currently being addressed by policy-makers.

Yet, we continue to use that same report card for making policy decisions that have long term consequences. Decisions like, what buildings are "underperforming" and are on the designated school list which dictates funding from public tax dollars to support the EdChoice voucher system.

Second, Ohio has failed to codify a school funding formula that allows for the equitable distribution of public tax dollars to schools in a manner that is clear and transparent. For years, elected school boards, public school treasurers, and superintendents have had to manage long term planning around state funding for public schools that has lacked consistency or stability.

Yet, we are considering public policy that adds to that uncertainty by expanding the current EdChoice voucher system. Under this system school districts lose money for kids they never got state money for and lose money at a rate that exceeds what they are given by the state. The lost revenue isn't just the state allocation. It can include local revenue from property taxes the community voted to give to its local public school. In addition, the EdChoice expansion comes at a time when the current voucher system is underutilized by close to 50%.

The third public policy to be considered is the centerpiece of the current debate -the expansion of EdChoice vouchers. What purpose does this particular policy, in its current form, serve in relation to Ohio's vision for educating children?

There seems to be a variety of responses to that question and each seems to serve a particular purpose as a means of defending the expansion of the voucher system.

The general sentiment seems to be that the policy allows the “money to follow the student” which allows for greater educational opportunities for more students in Ohio. Sometimes it's stated that the policy is intended to support children in poverty regardless of school performance. And, at other times it is applied to students of poverty in “underperforming” schools. What is the clear public policy?

How these three current public policy positions, the report card, funding formula, and vouchers, all three of which are in limbo, interact will have a profound impact on the vision for educating Ohio's children.

If left as they are today, what can we anticipate for the educational opportunities for Ohio's children in the future?

If the first two public policy issues are not addressed I submit, we can anticipate the following:

1. The poor data being used as part of the current accountability system will continue to falsely label too many schools as “underperforming” or “failing”.
2. Public perceptions about public schools will be negatively and falsely influenced by the system which leads to difficulty in earning community support.
3. Financial resources pulled back from public schools or held back from public schools will lead to reduced opportunities for students.
4. In addition, failing to codify a funding formula will maintain the current level of uncertainty that holds school districts back from developing reliable long range plans intended to meet the needs of all students.

In short, the fact that these two long standing public policy issues are unresolved remains a considerable sore point in Ohio. **For state leaders to move forward implementing any other public policy related to K-12 education, including Ed Choice, without first taking care of these two most important policies is, in a word, reckless.**

Perhaps, some might argue, reckless is too strong a term because the expansion of EdChoice vouchers offers a chance to make improvements to the educational opportunities for the state's students. Let's consider how that public policy, as it stands at this moment, potentially plays out against the long term vision for educating Ohio's children.

1. We can acknowledge that the current EdChoice system will mean less money for public schools. There is no way to avoid that fact. It becomes a multiplier to the impact of the local report card and funding formula problem.
2. The opportunity for Ohio's families to benefit from a voucher does not distribute itself across the state in an equitable manner. The fact is, not every locality has a private or parochial school within its footprint. And those kinds of schools are less likely to be

present in the poorer parts of the state. Equity has always been an important ingredient when the state considers how to distribute funding to schools.

3. Not every student who wants to enroll in a private or parochial school will be able to gain acceptance. Acceptance can be denied based on school capacity or student attributes like disability status.
4. For many families the voucher amount may not be adequate enough to cover tuition costs.

So, who is most likely to benefit from the current voucher program? Families with enough disposable income to afford the option, who live in a community where they have access to private or parochial option, who are able to gain acceptance. The rest have to remain in their current school which will have had resources reduced because of funding problems exasperated by the very public policy, EdChoice vouchers, that they couldn't access.

Consider, also, which form of schooling is best equipped for addressing the educational needs of the very students who the EdChoice vouchers are intended to support.

Who is built to address the needs of special education students-public schools

Who is built to address the needs of English as a Second Language students-public schools

Who has greater experience working with students of poverty-public schools

Who has greater experience addressing the needs of students impacted by trauma-public schools

Who has spent more time designing a system that is built to address diversity- public schools

In short, if you project how current public policies will impact the future of K-12 education in Ohio it points to increased inequities across student populations and across public school systems across the state. The road does not lead to greater equity it likely reproduces or magnifies the current inequities.

That said, let me state that I have great admiration for the work of our fellow educators in private and parochial schools. Collectively, we all change lives. Any of us from public, community, private, or parochial schools can share 1000's of stories of specific students whose lives we changed. Collectively, we should take great pride in our work.

What we shouldn't be forced to do is fight each other for financial resources.

What I reject is that our current public policy mess, which includes the lack of a meaningful report card and lack of a school funding formula, will be improved by moving forward with the current EdChoice system.

The last public policy component I want to reference is that which is presented in Ohio's constitution. As elected officials that is your ultimate policy manual. In it, you are charged with

providing for public schools in Ohio. That is priority one and it should direct all other public policy related to schools.

In short, first codify a school funding formula and fix the report card. Then, open the discussion to how to manage a voucher system that doesn't pit public, community, parochial and private schools against each other.

In closing I would say this.

The optimist would speculate that we share a vision for a robust system of public schools which would motivate policy makers to see what is wrong with the current state and make meaningful adjustments.

The pessimist would say that these policy positions are intentional and designed to destroy public schools in which case nothing will really change and Ohio will continue down this public policy path.

I encourage optimism and let's be clear about our vision.

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.