

Testimony on EdChoice Vouchers
HB 9 Conference Committee
Monday, February 17, 2020

Chairman Jones and Members of the Conference Committee

My name is Mandy Wagner and I am here to share with you why I am in support of SB 89 as passed by the House. I am sharing with you my rationale not only as a classroom teacher in the Canton City School District, but also as a parent of three, school-aged daughters in the Plain Local School District, and as someone who is really tired. So incredibly tired. I am tired as a mom and I am tired as a teacher. I am tired of having Ohio legislators on speed dial, lobbying them time and again to do what is right for Ohio's students, begging and pleading with them to please not pass one more bill to further reduce the funding we so desperately need in order to provide for our kiddos. I'm tired of seeing the looks on my students' faces when I have to rationalize the decisions of policy makers in Columbus who require them to take test after test, who write laws and change them the following year so their paths to graduation are unknown or unclear until their freshman year of high school, who have labeled them and their teachers as "failing," and legislate ways that reduce their funding so that they are not provided the same opportunities, courses, supports, and options that neighboring district students have. I'm tired. And you know what? They're tired, too.

President DiMauro of the Ohio Education Association outlined in his testimony before this committee last week the chilling data of what the expansion of EdChoice vouchers can mean for Ohio's public schools. House Bill 9 would permanently increase the eligibility level for the statewide income-based voucher to 300% of poverty and would continue to include buildings and districts not in the lowest 20% on the performance index indicator. Ladies and gentlemen, that is Canton City. Our residents are living in poverty, and we are in the lowest 20%. The cuts we have already felt that have our district on life support are about to get wider and deeper. If a resolution is not reached, more districts will fall victim.

According to Nick Ciolli, Budget Analyst for the state of Ohio, in fiscal year 2019, 31 traditional districts were designated for the EdChoice Program. Again, Canton City was one of them. This year, under the current formula, 160 districts would now be impacted, and in 2021, the number of districts would almost triple to 426. District leaders are in a panic, stressing over what the implications might mean for them should expansions be enacted. Well, I can tell you what it would look like. We've been feeling the impact of these vouchers for a long time. And it rips my heart out every day. We've been designated a "failing" district by a flawed report card system for years, and because of a system I cannot begin to comprehend, we, instead of being given wrap services are instead stripped of resources that we desperately need and, by not having, further exacerbates the problem.

One implication that President DiMauro addressed was that of reduced curriculum offerings. Having endured the effects of what vouchers do to a district for many years, it now goes beyond reduced curriculum offerings. We cannot offer our students some of the most basic of services. In a district that struggles with literacy, we have whole buildings without

librarians. We cannot afford the staffing and cannot afford to resource materials. Our EL (English Learners) student population in our schools is exploding. Last year my building educated thirty-some students with the assistance of one multi-lingual support person. This year our population doubled, and yet, we do not have additional staff members to support this growing group of students. We are short counselors to provide social, emotional, and psychological supports to our county's most vulnerable student population. The list goes on.

President DiMauro also stated that higher voucher eligibility would increase the pressure on local taxpayers to meet the district's financial needs. This is true! Our district currently has a levy on the ballot this March. Without Issue 19, our district, after cutting \$7.6 last year, will be forced to cut an additional \$5.1 million more for next school year. Cuts would significantly impact classroom learning and teacher and administration staffing levels. Levels that are already low.

Because Columbus has failed to do what is right by Canton City, the responsibility has fallen on us teachers and administrators to lobby the community for financial help. So Saturday, I put on three layers of clothing, the heaviest, warmest jacket I could find, and took to the streets of Canton to knock doors of community members in an effort to garner support for our levy. As I pulled out of my driveway, sighing with fatigue, the vapors of my breath creating a visible cloud of steam in front of me, I couldn't help but feel very angry. Because my district, my school children, cannot get the financial resources they need and deserve, I had to leave my own children and lose my precious time with them to beg community members to support our school levy. Thinking about it now as I write this brings tears to my eyes.

I navigated my car down the streets of Canton and parked in front of a rundown home in a neighborhood populated by supportive residents and many of my students. I walked crooked and broken down sidewalks and knocked doors, some of which were hanging on by one hinge. At the first house I knocked, I was greeted by a gentleman in his mid 40s. "Good afternoon!" I said cheerily and, looking at my list, asked for him by name. "My name is Mandy and I am a teacher at Canton McKinley High School. I'm out talking to residents to see if they plan on voting this March 17th." A warm, friendly smile from him revealed two missing front teeth. "I most certainly am. What can I do for you?" I shared with him information about our levy and asked him if we could count on him for this support. "Of course," he said. "I've got four adult children and I usually go around and pick them up since I am the only one with a car. We all go vote together," he said proudly, his chest puffing out a little. "We'll do whatever it takes to support the schools."

One car. Five families. Whatever it takes.

The next house I approached smelled of cat urine. I took a breath and knocked on the door. Same opening greeting from me, same warm welcome from the resident. "I'm a graduate of McKinley! I was just on my way to my second job, so I'm so glad you caught me." "Oh!" I said. "You have two jobs?" "No," the young lady replied as I now noticed the scrubs she

was wearing, “I actually have three; I’m just on my way to my second job today.” At the end of our quick conversation, she assured me that she would be voting in favor of our levy.

At the next house, I sat and had coffee with a 72-year-old retired man in his eat-in kitchen. “It’s too cold for you to be outside. Why don’t you come in a minute?” Sitting at his worn but clean counter, he talked about his own six children, many of whom had grown and moved out of state, and then his two grandchildren that he can only watch one at a time. “They are a lot. They make me tired,” he chuckled. Tired. I know what that’s like. I chuckled too. As we took the last sips of our coffee, he affirmed his support of our schools, though he had no loved ones currently attending. “But I know how important it is to keep our schools up and running,” he said, patting my hand.

These are the residents we are asking to dig deeper and help out our schools. And you know what? Each one did because they love Canton and they love their children and they love and support what we do for them with the little we are given. As I write this, I weep for the state of our current system. A gentleman who probably doesn’t have proper health care or regular dental treatment and has one car between him and his four children will do what it takes to help our schools. A woman, working three jobs will do what it takes and further sacrifice to help out our schools. A retired 72-year-old, no children in the district, will offer me a cup of coffee, his gratitude, and his vote to help out our schools. And me, a single mother of three, leaving her own children at home to knock doors in frigid temperatures, to drive to Columbus on a holiday, a bonus day that I should be spending with my family, grading papers, writing lesson plans, or just practicing self care... to do what it takes to help our schools.

These stories that I am sharing with you today can be seen as inspiring. The love and support of a community warms the heart, doesn’t it? But to me, this is heartbreaking. This isn’t the way it’s supposed to be. Financial support for our state’s most important public establishment should not be begged for by teachers and administrators. Residents who can barely rub two pennies together should not be asked to dig deeper and do more. It is awful. And so, so sad. What is wrong with us?

I’m tired. The residents of Canton are tired. My students are tired. I am here in Columbus this morning to ask you to do the right thing. You have the resources available to make the real difference in my community. I, like the teachers who asked before me, urge the members of this committee to come to a resolution on this issue. The language in SB 89 as passed by the house is our best plan moving forward by setting state funded (not school funded) vouchers as the default option and would begin to alleviate additional pressures our district endures.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I would be happy to respond to questions from the committee.