

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

Chair Jones and members of the Conference Committee:

My name is Phil Hayes and I am a social studies teacher in the Columbus City Schools, but have also been elected to serve as the Vice President of the Columbus Education Association, the largest local teachers' union in the state of Ohio. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you candidly and honestly as an individual and provide my testimony on the EdChoice Voucher Program.

I believe that the changes to the EdChoice Voucher Program contained in SB 89 as passed by the House represent the best path forward. This bill contains an important decision to move away from the flawed state report card and gives the General Assembly the opportunity to directly pay for a program that it created.

Additionally, SB 89 would dissolve academic distress commissions in three cities, demand school funding cost studies and establish a study committee to perform school funding cost studies and most importantly examine the state report card. I'd like to talk about why this last provision is particularly important to all of us.

Test scores, attendance, graduation and other measures are applied many different ways to give a school or district their report card grade. A school or district's grade on the report card can set a number of unpleasant consequences in motion, all of which are punitive.

For example, if you get three consecutive "F's" on the report card as a district, you face takeover by an academic distress commission. If your school scores too low, your students are eligible for vouchers which take much-needed resources away from your district, impacting other students.

In Columbus, each student who uses a voucher takes an average of \$5,000 state funding with them, yet we only receive \$3,200 in per-pupil funding from the state. This means for every three students that leaves Columbus City Schools, another student—one who remains in the district-- is left unfunded by the state.

If we were to apply the same methodology of the state report card to the General Assembly, we'd have to use the legislative process instead of test scores. Since the 133rd General Assembly convened in January of last year, a total of 789 bills have been introduced by legislators from both chambers. Of the 564 of the 789 bills introduced, or 71 percent, have yet to be heard by a committee or are in the hearing process now. A total of 96 bills of the 789 have cleared their home chamber and are on the way to the other chamber. And of those 789 bills, just 29, representing 3.6 percent of the total bills introduced since January of last year have been signed into law by the Governor.

How would we weigh and take these statistics into account? Would legislators who were the primary sponsor of a bill that became a law get a higher score than a legislator who was a co-sponsor? If a legislator writes more bills than another one, would they be graded higher than another? Would we look at the legislative achievement gap between Democrats and Republicans and attempt to address it? Would we take resources from an overperforming party or chamber and give it to an underperforming party or chamber?

What kind of punitive measures would be used to incentivize an improved legislative process for a party, chamber or individual legislator who didn't meet their benchmarks? Perhaps a Legislative Distress Commission could be enacted for each chamber. In the House, if a Representative failed to make their bill passage benchmarks for three consecutive years in a row, the Speaker of the House, Majority Leader and Majority Whip would come in. They would be responsible for running the Representative's office, dealing with constituents and voting on legislation. They would remain in control of the district until the Representative's bills were passed at a higher rate. Keep in mind that none of the three Legislative Distress Commission members are actual voting constituents of the Representative's district.

Imagine if a legislator was consistently underperforming and consistently unable to get their bills out of committee. One way to solve that problem would be to transfer those bills to a different legislator. To help get the newly transferred bills to pass, resources would be needed. The legislator taking ownership of those transferred bills would also receive additional staff time, postage, office space and have expenses covered by the legislator who couldn't get their bills to pass. One thing—the legislator who took ownership of those transferred bills wouldn't be held to the same standards as the “underperforming” legislator.

You may hear this and bristle. A system like this must be designed by someone who has no understanding of the legislative process and the good work that you all do. I suppose then that you'd see my point that those are exactly the feelings that I and my fellow educators have about education policy in current law. Those of us with professional training, credentials, years of experience and hearts filled with caring for our students; we feel unrecognized, and unappreciated. We feel that sometimes our government is working against the progress they want us to help our students achieve.

You have a big job to do. I urge you to support provisions of SB 89 as passed by the House. I believe this represents the best path forward. The bill contains an important decision to move away from the flawed state report card to determine voucher eligibility, eliminates academic distress commissions in three cities and gives the General Assembly the opportunity to directly pay for the voucher program that it created.

Chair Jones, this concludes my testimony. I'd be happy to respond to any questions from the committee.