

Dear Representative Jones and HB 9 Conference Committee,

I write to you today as a Professor of Education at the University of Cincinnati and as an expert on education policy to urge you to seriously rethink the rapid expansion of vouchers in our state. While I do not speak on behalf of my university, I write as an expert with 15 years of experience in researching school choice and its impact on public education and overall student performance.

One state legislator recently said to me, “it really comes down to how you feel about school choice.” In large part, he is right, though there is a bit more caveat to it than that. If you believe that school choice is always right and justified, then you would have no problem continuing with the expansion of vouchers in any form through any way possible. But if you believe that, as an Ohio statesman, you have a responsibility to ensure a thorough and efficient system of education and provide an “adequate and equitable” free public education to all children (I’m using the language in most state constitutions here), then vouchers for private schools should only be used when students don’t have access to an “adequate and equitable” education. This may be because their local school is underperforming and their parents cannot afford moving into another school’s catchment area or to pay for a private alternative. Historically, this was the rationale behind the EdChoice Scholarship program and I believe it should remain so.

Currently, though, many people believe the criteria for accessing an EdChoice voucher is undermining the public education system. As money and resources are diverted from the traditional public schools, the system increasingly cannot provide an adequate and equitable education to the students who remain within it. So, the responsibility of the policymaker then becomes to ensure that the criteria for the scholarships reflects the aim of an adequate and equitable education in *both* the private and public sectors. As such, I recommend the following big-picture suggestions:

- **Better ensure equity and adequacy** within the private schools receiving vouchers.
 - This means requiring **additional accountability measures** to gauge the quality of education provided in those schools to ensure that it is adequate. While many people assume that private schools are superior in performance to public schools, research actually shows the opposite to be true in Ohio and in most states. If we want to make sure that an adequate education is being provided, we should be careful about turning over public tax dollars to subpar private schools. Researchers have found that many underperforming voucher schools fail to close, as would have been predicted under market logic, due to lack of demand. Rather, many parents stayed put in these schools, thereby demonstrating that competition and markets are not failsafes for ensuring good schooling. We currently do not sufficiently address how to handle vouchers being sent to low performing private schools.

- And, importantly, this means **ensuring that those private schools are equitable to all students**, which means requiring that they do not discriminate against children based on any factor, from student behavior record to grades and from the gender identity of the child to the sexual orientation of his or her parents. All students must be provided equal opportunity in private schools receiving state funds. And they should learn in settings that model equity, where teachers are not discriminated against for their religious views, marital status, or any other factor.
- Require eligibility criteria that are based on an **accurate and up-to-date assessment of the public school**. That means ending the use of report cards from many years ago and restricting it to report cards from 2017 at the very earliest. This gives a more accurate picture of how public schools are actually doing now. Even better, the report card system should be entirely revamped, as it is not an accurate portrait of school performance.
- Within the use of report cards, we also need to give **either require more failing indicators or give greater weight to some areas of concern over others**. When some of our longtime high-performing districts fail to show adequate improvement (often due to such large percentages of their students already doing well and only a tiny fraction not improving), that is not a significant justification for determining that that school is underperforming.
- Tuition at private schools receiving vouchers must **never exceed the cost of the voucher** itself. Otherwise, you exacerbate hierarchy in the private sector, where families with more means will supplement their voucher to seek even more expensive and elite education. The will expand a private school “underclass.”
- **Focus more on the income of the family**, which is the largest determining factor on access to quality education. An appropriate means test level is 200-250%. If you move to higher amounts, such as 400%, you run into a host of problems and put the public system in serious jeopardy. We have witnessed these unfold in other countries—some even bringing about widespread rioting in the streets—before they were revised and removed. Let's not repeat those mistakes in Ohio.
- Be aware that the use of vouchers has **increased racial and economic segregation** in our schools.
- Finally, remember that the **use of vouchers DOES NOT REFLECT THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE**. As evidenced by a Gallop Poll, only about 1/3 of citizens support the use of vouchers. Research also shows that the more one knows about vouchers, the less likely one is to support them. It is no surprise that most education policy experts and many public school leaders who have studied the use and impact of vouchers do not support them.

Relative to the more particular issue facing the legislature on EdChoice, I offer these recommendations:

- **Use only report card data from the most recent two years** to get a more accurate reflection of school performance.
- **Require more than one D or F to trigger voucher eligibility.**

- Stop paying for vouchers by deducting the cost from state funding that goes to school districts. **Direct pay** would have less detrimental impact on districts.
- Stay true to the program's intentions by giving **vouchers only to families who started within the public system** that don't have access to an adequate and equitable education, not those who have never been a part of the public system to begin with.
- **Cap the loss of district funds** for high poverty schools at 5% and other school districts at 10-15% in order not to inflict additional harm on those schools.

As a public servant and education policy expert, I am always happy to provide the research needed to support good policymaking. Don't hesitate to reach out if there are ways that I can help you.

Respectfully,
Sarah Stitzlein, PhD
Professor of Education
University of Cincinnati
513-593-2537
sarahstitzlein@hotmail.com