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Sheena Barnes, Toledo Public Schools, Testimony on House Bill 9

Good morning, Chairman Jones and members of the conference committee

Thank you for allowing me to testify on amended house bill 9 however, please understand the Toledo Public Schools district would prefer house bill 89 to ensure resources could truly be provided to our students.

My name is Sheena Barnes, I am the newest board member of Toledo Public Schools, the executive director of Equality Toledo and a proud mother of 3 TPS students.
I'm here with my fellow Ohio board members and administration to ensure we help every child in public education with resources that are much needed and unfortunately are becoming increasingly demanding.

So I continuously ask?

What would public education resemble for children in Ohio if public schools weren't utilizing funding to cover the cost of Ed choice vouchers?

As a mother, I'll tell you it would mean funding for mental health counselors for students dealing with mental health. Students wouldn't miss up to three hours a month during the school year, like my son that is navigating with depression and anxiety after a neighborhood gun violence experience like many other students in our district. As gun violence increases in our student's neighborhoods, we have to understand the impact of trauma on students in their mental capacity to retain new information. New studies like the Adverse Childhood Experience show early intervention can help to slow or redirect the long term effects violence has on students.

If TPS and other public schools were able to use the wellness funds for in-school mental health services instead of supplanting current spending on wellness so our general fund can cover the cost of new vouchers, this could assist in lowering discipline situations in our classrooms and raising the graduation rates. Both high disruptive behaviors and low graduation rates have been linked to youth that has experience trauma at high rates. My son's trauma from gun violence exposure hinders his education where he went from being on the honor roll to barely earning a 2.0 after that incident.

What would public education resemble for children in Ohio if public schools weren't utilizing funding to cover the cost of Ed choice vouchers?

As a special needs mother of a child that is on the autism spectrum, I will express to you that it would mean every special needs classroom would have enough living wage paid paraprofessionals available to assist our teachers. Each student on any cognitive and physical level would have higher accessibility to meet or surpass their IEP goals. This would mean that students like my son could gain one on one education time as needed to help to lower frustration and increase their self-esteem when interacting with peers about school-related material.

What would public education resemble for children in Ohio if public schools weren't utilizing funding to cover the cost of Ed choice vouchers?

As the executive director of Equality Toledo an LBGT organization that works to eliminate discrimination in our region on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, through education, community partnerships, and activism. I'll tell you it would mean the highest risk population for youth homelessness and human trafficking would have profound wrap-around services to ensure they're seen and supported as they should be. Services that would include support for Gay Straight Alliances, transition counseling for our trans and nonbinary youth and funding for safe self-identifying clothing that would decrease LGBT students from using unsafe measures such as binding with an ace bandage that could cause suffocation.

I will continuously ask questions but why should our students have to when it comes to their care in our schools and their education?

I am proud of the titles that I have earned because each has a strong focus on our youth, please help us to continue to keep kids first.

Thank you for hearing my testimony today, I will answer any questions if you have any.