

Teresa Silva

Testimony before the Ohio House of Representatives

Ohio Statehouse

Columbus, Ohio

February 17, 2020

Back when our son was little, we used to drive past Saint Ignatius High School and point it out to him, saying "That's the best school in Cleveland. And if you study really hard, maybe you'll get to go there some day!" In the back of our minds we always knew it would be a stretch for us to be able to afford a Saint Ignatius education, but we wanted to plant the seed early in our son's mind. As the years went on, we learned more about the school and got even more interested. However, we also faced some financial problems and were worried that encouraging our son to dream big, only to have to smash that dream later, would be a cruel thing to do. We prayed a lot and worked hard to try to improve our situation. I personally felt a lot of anxiety about this, until one day I realized that God has plans for each and every one of us, and that included our son. I kept praying. Our son is an honors student and talented hockey player. We chose Saint Ignatius not only because of its excellent academics, athletics program, and extracurriculars but also because of its dedication to community service. As many past and current families have told us, "They produce good boys." The culture and values that this school embodies are the #1 reason we chose it for our son. We want our children to attend a school that teaches and supports our values.

Our son attended open house, a summer enrichment program, and shadowing at the school and was totally hooked. We studied with him all summer to prepare him for the High School Placement Test so he could try to earn scholarship money. He took the test once and earned a small scholarship. We then hired a tutor to work with him to improve his score. He took the test two more times and earned a bigger scholarship! He scored higher than 98% of students in the nation! But our heart sank when we realized we still couldn't guarantee him that we could afford to send him there.

Then in November we got some interesting news. Our school district's high school was placed on the underperforming schools list, and our son would be entitled to a \$6,000/year EdChoice voucher. I was so grateful and yet so astonished that I personally contacted the Ohio Department of Education to verify that this was correct. And they responded to me in writing confirming that he did qualify. It was the answer to a years-long prayer! All of that hard work and sacrifice on our son's part and ours was finally going to pay off.

We also applied for need-based financial aid through the high school and got a generous offer. At that point, with the need-based financial aid in addition to the academic scholarship and the EdChoice voucher, we could finally tell our son that he could attend Saint Ignatius! He proudly attended the school's Ignatian Scholars Banquet, and we beamed with pride and exhaled with relief knowing this long process had come to a fruitful ending.

That is until...

Some public school districts, unhappy with being placed on the underperforming list, lobbied legislators to change the rules of the game after the outcome had already been decided. Due to their poor sportsmanship, our EdChoice voucher was now in jeopardy, and we had to go back to our son to tell him we were wrong and he might not be able to attend the school of his choice after all. Deliberations between the House and Senate were excruciatingly difficult to watch, and I was extremely outraged at this 11<sup>th</sup> hour change of game rules when the outcome had already been determined. Nevertheless, we were assured by all in the media that if they didn't come to an agreement by the February 1 opening of the EdChoice application process, the list and rules would stand. Huh...

On the night of January 31, unable to come to an agreement yet also unwilling to let the application process open, the House and Senate changed their own rules and granted themselves a 60-day extension to continue deliberating. This has left tens of thousands of families in limbo, waiting to make their plans for the upcoming school year. We are faced with questions such as:

- What happens if the 60 days go by and our assigned public school is removed from the list?
- How are we supposed to sign acceptance letters from the private school and commit to attending there and playing sports, all the while not knowing if we will be able to afford tuition?
- Should we be attending public high school registration events just in case?
- Do we need to move to a new school district before the start of next school year?
- Will those few months between April and the start of school be enough time for us to sell our house and buy a new one?
- How much money will we lose from having to sell, buy, and move?
- What will this mean for the other children in our family?

If the House and Senate want to discuss changing the rules of EdChoice going forward, they are welcome to have that discussion. But the issue before us today involves a specific fact pattern and a specific group of affected families who have had the rug pulled out from under them just when they thought they had their children's schooling decisions – and their own family housing decisions – made. This delay and possible changing of the eligibility rules is an unfair sleight of hand causing real hardship to real middle-class families. Most severely affected are those families like mine who wouldn't qualify for EdChoice based on income guidelines but still can't afford private high school tuition while paying college tuition for other family members or caring for aging loved ones, or any of the many other situations people find themselves in that aren't obvious when looking at income alone.

I urge you to please do the right thing for THESE families and allow the Ohio Department of Education to immediately open the EdChoice application portal and start processing applications.

Sincerely,

Teresa Silva and family

Broadview Heights, Ohio