

Testimony of Tom Burton
EdChoice Voucher Program
February 12, 2020

Good morning Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee. I am Tom Burton, superintendent of Princeton City Schools, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program.

I would like to take a moment to talk about how EdChoice not only impacts Princeton but also how this voucher program could negatively impact public education across the state.

Princeton City Schools is comprised of multiple municipalities including four villages, two cities, and parts of three counties and townships in Southwest Ohio. We are the most diverse school district in Ohio. Roughly 65% of our district is economically disadvantaged, 40% African American, 30% Hispanic, 22% English Learners, and 21% Caucasian, 6.5% Multiracial. With over 400 business and community partners, Princeton is focused on supporting pathways and opportunities for each student. We believe in choice, but we also believe in fairness, equity, and accountability.

We fight for fairness for each student so that each and every single one of our students are provided with an educational experience that empowers them for college, career and life success.

We fight for equity in funding so our students have access to support services, technology and instructional practices that are researched-based, differentiated and accessible for all. What we're seeing with the proposed changes to the EdChoice voucher program could very well prevent all of that from happening. Let me detail the specific loss that could occur. The expansion of the school choice voucher under current EdChoice rules could cost our district close to \$3 million next year alone, depending on the number of parents of students already attending private schools who apply for the scholarship. This is 3.7% of our current district budget. This is \$3 million of taxpayer dollars. Because of a reduction in state funding through the loss of the business tax, we - as is the case with many districts across the state - are already stretching dollars to maintain district programs. Analyzing our expenditures and proactively seeking savings is a common practice for us. The proposed changes to the EdChoice voucher program make it even more difficult to forecast and I am afraid it may also mean that we will have to return to our

residents even more frequently to ask them to support their schools through the passage of levies. I know that the most recent conversations about EdChoice have softened on the language about where the state allocations will be deducted but until it is official we have to evaluate potential loss based on the information we have now.

As for the imbalance of the proposed changes, this year Princeton will receive \$1,126 in state funds for each enrolled pupil. This is only 7.8% of what it costs to educate a student at Princeton. Compare this to the \$6,000 it will cost us if one high school student leaves Princeton to attend a private school - that is the equivalent to six students attending Princeton High School. Similarly, one elementary student leaving Princeton to attend a private school is equivalent to just over four students attending a district elementary school. The difference between what we receive from the state and the cost of a voucher must then come from local dollars. When our taxpayers vote for a levy, they are voting for money for Princeton City Schools - their public school district. They are not voting for money to go to private schools. The end result will have a drastic impact on our district.

With respect to how schools are placed on the EdChoice list, I would respectfully ask you to consider the purpose of the EdChoice program. For years I was under the impression that the program was to help those who couldn't help themselves gain access to different learning environments that may be better suited for them. At Princeton we have students moving into our district 1-2 sometimes even more grade levels behind. This year alone we had 89 students move into the district over the age of 14 with no education at all. Further, we had nine students enroll in their senior year with fewer than five credits toward graduation. The point is simple, in each case, the success of the students in unique situations will impact us multiple times on a report card. Thus, when compared to other districts that don't have the same issues the results will always be the same. However, that is not to say that we aren't working hard and in fact, we know we have work that needs to be done, but taking money away from public education certainly isn't going to fix these situations.

As you know, it costs more money to educate students that are economically disadvantaged, English Learners, and behind academically. Since a student getting a voucher is not guaranteed to be accepted into the school of their choice, the purpose of EdChoice will not be fulfilled. They could be excluded from attending based on performance, special needs, or due to the inability to pay the differential between the voucher and tuition cost. However, the students that are achieving and

can afford to attend will be accepted leaving those students who are struggling most in our district with less money to meet their needs.

At Princeton, we are always striving to be better. Our district's commitment to providing excellent educational experiences and empowering students to succeed in their classrooms and beyond is not something I take for granted. It is motivating to see our students succeed, and it is inspiring to see the ways in which they grow. I am proud to be part of such an engaged community and am humbled by our students, who not only excel academically but also give back selflessly. I hope we have the state's support in advancing our district mission to empower each student for college, career and life success.

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 conference committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you this morning, and would be pleased to answer any questions.