

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program. My name is Vaughn Bell, and I currently serve as the Vice President of the Westerville City Schools Board of Education.

In addition to serving as a member of the board of education, I pastor of the Triumphant Church of God and am the very proud father of two wonderful and intelligent daughters. My daughters attend Westerville Central High School and are having what they describe as a tremendous high school experience.

My oldest daughter is active in sports, a member of the Letterman Leadership Committee, and is participating in several Advanced Placement classes with a life vision of becoming an attorney. My youngest daughter is also involved in athletics and is participating in Honors and advanced coursework in the Health Pathways Program and has a vision of becoming a neurosurgeon.

I feel compelled to share my testimony with you today because one of the things that we teach our young people today is "If you see something, say something!" So, I am here today to say something about what I see happening to public education in the state of Ohio.

Based on the recent EdChoice expansion that exploded the number of buildings statewide that are eligible for performance-based vouchers from approximately 500 to over 1,200, two of our three high schools, Westerville Central and Westerville South, have been classified as failing schools and have been placed on the eligibility list.

These schools are anything but failing buildings. They offer a full schedule of Honors, Advanced Placement, College Credit Plus, and International Baccalaureate coursework. Westerville Schools offers students a wide array of athletic and other extracurricular activities and meets the needs of our special education student population.

In Westerville Schools we have a 94 percent four-year graduation rate where more than 70 percent of graduates pursue post-secondary education at colleges and universities all across the country and around the world or serve our country by entering the military.

I see that these are not failing schools and therefore have to say something about the evaluation process that would label them as such. The fact that these and hundreds of other schools from around the state are included on a list of failing schools is clear evidence of the inconsistencies and inadequacies of the current grade card system. This is a system that has been widely recognized as seriously flawed and in desperate need of serious revision or elimination altogether.

One of the reasons that I am opposed to any expansion of the EdChoice Voucher Program is because it makes performance-based vouchers available based on data that is produced by a system that is both flawed and unreliable.

A second reason that I am opposed to the current expansion of EdChoice is because I see that it does nothing to address the stated problem of failing schools, so I have to say something. The EdChoice Voucher Program removes students and diverts public school funding away from buildings that have been identified as failing but does absolutely nothing to address the underlying causes that contribute to the building being a failure.

There is no evidence to prove that the way you turn around a failing building is by decreasing its financial resources, redirecting some of its most talented students to private schools, and providing it with fewer social emotional resources.

That's what EdChoice does.

A third reason I am opposed to Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program is because I see that public schools are held to different set of standards than private, parochial, or charter/community schools, so I have to say something.

As a member of the Westerville Board of Education, I was elected by the registered voters living within our district. If I need to meet with two of my fellow board members to discuss school business, then a meeting must be scheduled, notice provided to the public, and the meeting has to be open to the public. Because we are responsible for taxpayer dollars, we are audited by the State Auditor's Office annually, and we must accept and educate all students within our district, regardless of their level of achievement.

Private schools are not held to those same standards. They are governed by private boards that are free to make independent decisions behind closed doors, they are not held to the same financial disclosure requirements, and they are free to have selective admissions policies that allow them to reject anyone not able to meet their academic standards or financial requirements. Any school that accepts public funding should be accountable to the same set of standards that public schools are required to meet.

I am not opposed to school choice. What I am opposed to is the use of public resources to subsidize and pay for education at private schools.

I am here today as a product of Columbus City Schools, a widowed father of two public school students, a taxpayer, a voter, and a member of the Westerville Board of Education to advocate for putting an end to the use of local taxpayer approved school levy dollars being sent to private schools.

In November of 2019 the voters in the Westerville City School District approved a 103-million-dollar bond and operating levy package and the language is very clear that those funds are to be used for Westerville City Schools. If corrective actions are not taken regarding EdChoice, then 100% of the funding for the performance-based program will come from our local, voter approved levies. This is an expense that the voters were not anticipating and were never informed of.

If you see something, say something!

I have taken this to heart, so as I have participated in meetings and discussions with parents, members of the business community, local government leaders, and concerned taxpayers and shared with them the facts about the expansion of EdChoice, they are at first shocked and surprised, and that sense of shock quickly wears off and transforms into anger. Their anger arises out of disappointment with the effects of the program on public schools and also because of the process that was used to enact the legislation. A process that allowed no public debate on the issue.

If you see something, say something!

The argument that taxpayers should control the money that they pay to schools is absolutely true. Taxpayers exercise their control through the election of local school boards and voting on school levies. Through this process, I am here to say that I believe the Westerville City Schools community has clearly spoken to this issue. Funds voted on and passed should be used for Westerville City Schools.

If you see something, say something!

I see that statewide, public schools are losing \$148 million to EdChoice this year, up from \$107 million last year. So, I have to say something because our public schools cannot continue to suffer this kind of assault and we remain silent.

I support SB89 because it eliminates performance-based vouchers and retains income-based vouchers funded by the state of Ohio and not local voter approved levy dollars.

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 conference committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide input regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program. I am happy to address any questions you may have for me.