

February 18, 2020

To: HB9 Conference Committee

From: Emily Mowery, PTA President, Cherrington Elementary School, Westerville, Ohio

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you for taking the time to read and consider my perspective on Ohio's EdChoice Voucher Program. My name is Emily Mowery. I am writing as a concerned parent, taxpayer, voter, and community member. As a proud Ohio native, I have always believed that strong public schools were part of what makes Ohio an attractive place to live. I am a product of Ohio's public schools from K-12. After graduate school, I worked here in Columbus Public Schools for five years. Currently, my four children ranging from first grade to eighth grade attend Westerville City Schools, here in Central Ohio. During our nine years in this district, I have been very involved as a parent volunteer, currently serving my second year as the president of our neighborhood elementary school's PTA. My children have been in four different buildings in our district, and I have given many hours of my time to support the great things that are happening there in any way that I can.

With the changes in legislation last summer regarding the expansion of the EdChoice Voucher program, Westerville would jump from 1 qualifying "underperforming" school to 14 out of 24 buildings qualifying for EdChoice Vouchers next year. This statistic is impossible to understand. In the years that I have spent in the schools and working with other families, I have heard countless stories of positive experiences, in which families rave about the education their children are receiving. Would 10,000+ families with a plethora of other options in central Ohio continue to send their children to schools that they felt were underperforming? Some of the schools with the very best reputation in the district are on that list. Even one school that is only admitted by lottery, with a large wait list every year – will be deemed failing. Why would families be trying to lottery into a failing school? Perhaps because it's not failing, but the standards and the report card system are flawed.

In the elementary school where I serve on PTA (and one of the ones deemed to qualify as underperforming under the new standards), about 45% of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch. We also specialize in serving a population of students with autism-related disorders. We serve a large population of English Language Learners from all over the world. The students in our building come from a diverse set of households, backgrounds, and needs. And yet our building does amazing things. Since the beginning of the Third Grade Reading Guarantee – our amazing teachers and staff have helped every single third grader who has passed through our halls pass that guarantee. 100%. Two years ago, a pair of parents started a chess club and have almost 100 students every week excited to learn the game of chess. Since that started, our little school has earned many first place trophies from chess tournaments around Central Ohio. Our team of reading intervention specialists help kids who come to school without knowing letter names and sounds: reading early reader books in a matter of months. Our music teacher is able to use the power of music to change the tone of the day for a student who is struggling. I could extend these stories to the middle and high school levels as well. My daughter who is in eighth grade this year will be taking AP classes next year as a freshman in high school because of the exceptional education she has received in Westerville Schools. There are so many options for her high school studies in the district, including 3 different career tracks or the International Baccalaureate program. Our school district is graduating a thousand students every year who are prepared for the next step and beyond.

That brings me to my concern. While I support everyone's right to choose the educational path for their own children, I do not support the use of taking funds from the students enrolled in public schools in order to pay for private education for middle class families. Our public schools are asked to take on the enormous task of educating every student within their boundaries, with the very minimum amount of funding. Organizations like PTA and other fundraisers and grants are the only way that schools in our district are able to have things like field trips, field days, educational assemblies, new playground equipment, supplemental reading materials for students, recess supplies, etc. I see teachers personally funding their classrooms all the time because we only have the minimum. Our district just passed a levy this past November that hopes to build two new buildings in order to relieve overcrowding and help kids attend schools closer to home rather than enduring long bus rides. But with this new legislation, we have the potential to lose all of that new funding to pay for private school vouchers for families who have never set foot in our buildings, who were previously affording to pay for that private school, but will now receive money from our taxpayers' pockets. And those schools receiving the vouchers are not subject to the state report card standards that public schools are held accountable to. The new legislation is incredibly unfair, unethical, and I believe a path to destruction of our public education system if action is not taken.

Thank you for your time. Please consider passing legislation that will support the best path of education from this point forward for all students, without taking money directly from the pockets of our public schools. The children in the state of Ohio at large depend on those dollars for their very future.