

Testimony to Ohio Legislature Conference Committee on HB9

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Dear members of the committee, my name is John W. Halkias, and I am a member of the Plain Local Board of Education in Stark County, OH, and also past President of the Ohio School Boards Association. While I am not here to testify on behalf of the Association, my role there has given me statewide insight into public education in Ohio.

I am not here to quote to you specific financial impact. I am strictly here in opposition to EdChoice in ANY form. I am opposed for several reasons:

1. The Need for EdChoice is based upon a false premise – that Ohio’s Public Schools are failing;
2. That taxpayer dollars should NOT be spent at private institutions for education that are without public oversight of a publicly elected Board of Education, and that are not held to the same standards or grading system as Ohio’s public schools;
3. And finally that this legislature by proposing EdChoice is setting up a separate and unequal system of public education in Ohio, that does not accept all students, and that further exacerbates the unconstitutional and inadequate funding of Ohio’s schools that this legislature has failed to adequately address for many years.

Ohio’s public schools are NOT failing. The most significant indicator in the failure or success of a student is POVERTY. Most of what the state has labeled as “failing” schools are those schools in urban areas, where the degree of poverty is higher than average and where children have a significantly higher ACE (Adverse Childhood Experience) score than children from more affluent areas with more stable family environments. This is a societal problem not an educational problem. This lie has permeated even the highest levels of our government, and it is time to put a stop to it.

With few exceptions, Ohio’s public schools do an excellent job in educating Ohio’s children. I have seen proof of this all across the state of Ohio. My district is a microcosm of Ohio, wealthy, poor, urban, suburban, rural, and racially mixed. Our schools are not failing, but often our society fails our children before they walk in the door of those buildings.

My tax dollars should not be spent on private schools that have absolutely no public oversight, and that are not required to meet the same standards or evaluations as Ohio’s public schools.

The original bill would take local money, that was voted and passed for the local public schools, and give that money to private schools. The voters of my school district did not vote for levies to fund a private education.

And finally, WHY is the legislature setting up a separate and un-equal publicly funded system of education in the state of Ohio? Rather than work with local boards to make OUR public schools better, this legislature is focused on sending even more money to private schools under the guise of “Educational Choice”. How has that worked out for Ohio and its taxpayers in the charter school space?

These schools do not admit all as our public schools do. A recent flyer sent to my constituents urging families to apply under this law also makes it very clear that certain “admission standards” must be met. Suffice to say . . . they will not take children that are disabled, with IEP’s, and who do not meet their academic standards. They will attempt to skim the cream off the top, taking the best students and of course the best athletes while leaving the public schools with less resources.

My mother was a Greek immigrant and we learned that the Greeks established the very first public schools in ancient Greece. She taught all of her children the amazing opportunity they had in America to receive a free public education. I am here to defend our public schools and the heritage my people gave to America, YOUR public schools. They are a bastion of freedom and opportunity for ALL of our children. I am asking you to stop your support of non-public education with public dollars before you destroy and decimate Ohio’s public schools.

And one more thing. I would be remiss if I do not mention this. My district is at the center of the school territory transfer law that was stealthily passed in the last budget. Remember what I said about the diversity of our district – how we have the wealthy and the poor? Rather than sunset that provision and closing the door after our wealthiest taxpayers with all their influence on you leave our district . . . that door should be closed now as it was with the Department of Education 14 years ago when they failed to make their case for this very same transfer. Have the courage to do the right thing in the light of day.

I am now open for any questions.