

Dear Sir/Mam,

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts regarding Ed Choice and the proposed changes. I am Michael Fluhart, Principal of Shepherd Christian School. I have been in education for almost 25 years, teaching in public schools and working at both a Public Charter, located in the intercity and four different Christian Schools. Two of which strongly embraced the Ed Choice Voucher Program. I will admit I am a Pro School Choice advocate.

I have always felt it is the parent's responsibility for the education of their child. The school system- Public, non-public, Homeschool, charter, etc. are merely the tools at their disposal to achieve that responsibility. If you support HB 89 bill you will take the nonpublic school tool away from the middle-class family.

I am a product of public schools, and I have two sons, one graduated from a Christian school and one graduated from a public school. So, I am not coming before you with an us-them mentality. I am coming before you as an advocate for every child and every family. Not the wealthy family that has school options or the low-income family that HB 89 maintains the options for, but every child. I will be right up front as I read through HB 89 I am a little disappointed I feel it is a step backward for education in Ohio and in no way addressed the issues that got us to this point.

As I was preparing for this opportunity to speak to you today, I took the time to watch numerous newscasts and press conferences about the bill and the status of Ed Choice. My goal was to hear what was being said and come here today and say something that had not already been stated. What I was surprised, a little disappointed and even frustrated about was the misinformation, inaccuracy, and fabrications being expressed over our airways. Of the nine newscasts, I listen to; seven were inaccurate. From the news reporter that stated the number of schools added to the failing list jump from 500 to 12000, you and I both know he added a 0 to his notes. But the people listening to his broadcast don't. To the superintendent that stated, "When a child comes to a nonpublic school, they do not have to take standardized tests." The truth is all Ed Choice voucher students have to take the Ohio Achievement Test and if you are a school like mine that has over 63% of your students taking the opportunity to attend using vouchers, everyone has to take a standardized test. My kindergarten to 2nd grade take the Iowa Skills Assessment and my 3rd through 5th grade takes the OAA. This type of misinformation is disheartening just to make a point.

I can submit research that shows that vouchers save the public-school systems funds, which I know is contrary to what is being expressed in the press and is a common misconception. I can also provide research that shows students that attend nonpublic schools have a higher rate of success for completing college. But that is not what I am going to focus on. You already have that data.

I want to paint a real-world picture of what this change in Ed Choice will do to my school and many schools like mine, and for many of our families or future students.

Shepherd Christian, like many Christian schools, embraces the vision of the Ed Choice program. Currently, 73%- 102 of our students are enrolled in the Ed Choice program, of that 33%, or 34 are Ed Choice and 40% or 41 are Ed Choice Expansion. That percentage has been consistent over the last few years. The majority of my families, both Ed Choice and Ed Choice Expansion, reside in the Columbus

Public School system. The reality is a number of our students come to us 12-18 months below grade level. These students do not have a learning disability but are missing parts of their educational experience that would make them successful in the classroom and life. I am proud to say when a family works with us, we can get a student to grade level within two school years. I can point to our success rate on the 3rd Grade reading guarantee. This year as an example we had 15 3rd grade students take the fall assessment. Of those 15, 13 met the state standard. The two that did not, this is their first year at Sheperd.

Back to my point, the majority of those 34 Ed Choice students come from hard-working middle-class families. For these families or future families like them, the nonpublic school option is being taken away. The parent should have the right to decide based upon the individual needs of their child and family and not be inhibited by income. We are enabling low-income families, which is great. But we are eliminating an option from a whole group of people. They are being forced to return to their failing Columbus Public schools. Not being critical, but Columbus has struggled for decades and putting more students in their classrooms and increasing their costs is not the answer.

In addition to eliminating the middle class from vouchers, you are harming the ones currently enrolled. HB89 is potentially going to split families that are currently enrolled in the school and program. What about the younger siblings that are not currently enrolled but will be? One sibling can attend the nonpublic because of the voucher and one sibling having to attend the public school because they are not eligible for the voucher. What a mess for the families. You are now splitting siblings and families. Can you imagine having to run multiple kids to multiple schools?

I would like you to consider the ramifications to my school in general and other schools like mine. The reality for our school and I am sure all Christian schools that supported Ed Choice; if we lose 33% of our population, it will be a challenge to stay open. At a minimum, there will be staff reductions. Teachers and staff will lose their jobs.

HB 89, attacks the middle class, will cause job loss and will have a long term negative impact on our education system in our state. It appears the problem is with the Grade Card System and how we assess our schools. Fix that. Don't take options away from our families.

When I am teaching, I like to use analogies. I see our education system as the body. HB 89 puts a cast on the arm when we have a broken leg.

Thank you for your time.