

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Alex Thornton, and I am the School Counselor at Hill View Elementary in Sylvania Schools. Hill View has been designated as one of 1,227 failing or EdChoice schools for the 2020-2021 school year, and the third elementary in Sylvania to receive this designation. I am here today to voice my concern over the EdChoice voucher policy and to urge you to take action.

With the current implementation, valuable dollars that would promote student wellness and safety are taken from public schools and diverted to private schools that are not held to the same standards. These private schools are not required to report “value added” growth measures or “K-3 literacy” scores. The basis for determining a school to be failing and eligible for parents to utilize an EdChoice voucher as it is now is based upon a flawed report card system that doesn’t account for all the wonderful things that happen inside our schools.

As a public school, we teach all students from all backgrounds. Over 40% of our students at Hill View receive Free and Reduced Lunches, double the average across our district. This speaks to a changing demographic in our suburban area. While our demographics are shifting, our staff’s mindset has also needed to shift. We mindfully prioritize the emotional well-being of our students each day. Any student who walks through our door knows they are a valued member of the Hill View family, regardless of what may have happened outside of the school day or how long they stay with us. We get to know our students on a personal level during daily morning meetings and individual interactions, working to ensure both their emotional and basic needs are met. We know that if a student has not had breakfast or does not feel that they belong, little learning will take place throughout the day.

As a school counselor, I coordinate with staff members to make sure students’ needs are met so they are able to learn in the classroom. I may work with students who have not had a hot meal since lunch at school the day before and are acting out because they are hungry, a student who is suffering from traumatic flashbacks due to a comment a peer made innocently, teach multiple classroom lessons on emotion regulation, work with a student who is preoccupied and unable to focus in class due to a parent unexpectedly being in the hospital, and help to mediate disputes between groups of friends. This all changes in an instant when I receive a call that a student is in crisis.

As a district and school, we have been able to provide professional development to teachers and staff centered around working with students who have experienced trauma, started the process of utilizing restorative practices within our buildings, and developed community partnerships such as our Weekender Bag program to make food available to students who rely on the school to meet this need.

The diversion of hundreds of thousands of dollars to private schools will have a lasting impact on our public education system. I’m concerned that the loss of resources – especially in a time of increased mental-health needs – will come at the expense of what we continue to work so hard to prioritize – our children’s well-being. I worry it will come under the veil of increased

caseloads on already stretched thin staff including school counselors, school psychologists, special educators, administrators and classroom teachers. I worry it will come at the expense of community partnerships because staff members will not have the time nor energy to invest in these efforts, despite it being what kids need. I worry that we will have to continue to divert resources to responsive needs rather than being able to implement preventative measures. I worry that should schools continue to be designated as failing, a lasting impact on the community and the relationships school professionals work to foster will be felt.

If vouchers continue to exist within Ohio, consider supporting a system like the one outlined in Senate Bill 89, where school systems will not be drained of their financial resources from the state.

While I find Hill View and Sylvania to be a special place because of our students, staff, and community, I know we are not the only public school educators who want the best for these kids.

The future of all Ohio's children deserves to be bright, and that's only done by maintaining and strengthening our public schools.