



# Fairfield City Schools

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Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you so much for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher Program. I would also like to thank you for your service. My name is Billy Smith, and I am proud to serve as the superintendent of the Fairfield City School District. Our school district serves approximately 10,000 students and is located in Southwest Ohio.

I am here today to voice my support for Senate Bill 89, as passed by the House. I am aware the Senate did not concur with the House's plan to phase out performance-based penalties to schools and go to an income based voucher program. Recently, I read a memo from State Senator Matt Dolan in which he talked about the fact that the state of Ohio will find itself with 1,227 schools designated as failing schools because of a flawed report card system that was created nearly 7 years ago. Throughout all of my discussions about this topic, there is one thing that all stakeholders seem to be able to agree upon: the fact that our report card system is flawed. Knowing that the report card system is flawed, there is absolutely no way to justify using the state report card results to punish public schools throughout the state. I support Senator Dolan's plea at the end of his memo: He calls for everyone to do the right thing, take a breath, fix the immediate problem, and take the time needed to get the long-term policy fix done the right way. I support this common-sense collaborative approach and I am hopeful that elected officials can work together to make it happen.

I would like to take a moment to share some information about Fairfield City Schools and the potential impact the EdChoice Voucher program will have on our students, our schools, and our community if no changes are made. If no changes are made to the original structure, the District would have seven schools on the eligibility list for the 2020-2021 school year even though we do not have a single school on the list for the current school year. The district is projected to lose over 14 million dollars in funding over the next four years. It is worth noting that it is very difficult to put exact numbers on these amounts because we have no way of knowing exactly the number of students, etc.

However, I didn't come here today to talk about numbers or dollars. I came here to talk about the impact of the EdChoice voucher program on our students, schools and community. As a school district, we have been focusing on educating the whole child for quite some time. Recently, the state of Ohio identified four learning domains in their strategic plan. One of those learning domains is social-emotional learning. Years ago, our district partnered with Primary Health Solutions to open the nation's first school-based health center. Since its opening, we have seen a steady increase in the number of students receiving services. As a district, we provide transportation to the center during school hours. If we didn't, odds are that most of those students would not receive the most basic medical care that they need.

Last fall, we announced plans to become a 1:1 district. We think this is in the best interest of our students and will help prepare them for the future, regardless of what their plans are. Our students, staff, and community were so excited to hear about this initiative until news started breaking about the devastating effects of the EdChoice Voucher program. Immediately, there was a panic about whether or not we should proceed with our 1:1 plan. We are going to proceed next year for grades 9-12, but we are taking a "wait and see" approach for the future.

As a school district, we talk about meeting the needs of each student or ALL students. We talk about meeting them where they are. This is not an easy task when you serve 10,000 students but we are committed to being the best we can be for our kids.

A few examples: Years ago, we created a Fairfield Academy for students in grades 9-12. This Academy is a place for students that may not be successful in a building that has thousands of students. It is for students that need a smaller environment. The fact of the matter is that students are graduating from the Academy that would have dropped out in the past. This program is a costly one for the district, but we do it for the kids. One of my favorite stories is about a student that was constantly in the office at our high school, constantly disruptive, etc. She transferred to our academy and became a superstar. We are proud to serve each and every child that walks through our doors. We are currently renovating a building so that we can expand the academy services to serve our middle school students in grades 6-8. We are doing so because there is a need.

We have recently engaged in dialogue around providing some additional programs at the elementary level with the idea that we can intervene at an earlier age and make a difference in the lives of our students before they reach the secondary level. A lot of students in our district are in need of additional supports and services, academically and behaviorally. We work so hard to be there for them. These students and others are traditionally not accepted into private and parochial schools. The original structure of the EdChoice Voucher program will take away funding and resources that are used to provide resources and supports for all of our students. That funding will go to private and parochial schools that don't play by the same rules. They may have unlicensed teachers, they don't accept all students, and are not subjected to the same standardized testing as public schools. Since they are not subjected to the same standardized testing procedures, it is impossible for them to be held accountable in the same way.

Hopefully, by listening to my testimony today, you would agree that Fairfield City Schools, the district I've described today, is not a failing one. We are not a failing school district. We are a public school district full of dedicated employees that change lives every day. They help our students solve real life problems. They teach them. They love them. That is what we do and who we are.

In closing, I would like to share with you from a personal perspective. I am here as the superintendent of the Fairfield City School District. I am also here as a parent and as a grandparent. I am also here as a long-time resident of Fairfield. I attended Fairfield City Schools and could not have been more excited to give back and serve a district and community that means so much to me and my family. My oldest child graduated from Fairfield High School in 2012. I have another one graduating in a few months and another one graduating in May, 2021. My twin daughters are on pace to graduate in 2031! I am a believer that communities are as strong as our schools. I became a grandfather in October. I want my twin daughters and my grandchildren to grow up in a community and a public school system that is strong! Our school system and our community is strong, and we are working hard to make it stronger and better for the future. I worry about a voucher program that could potentially have devastating effects on our school district and community. I ask that you give serious re-consideration to supporting Senate Bill 89, as it was passed in the House.

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