

Testimony Statement of Brandon Atwood

Honorable Senators and Representatives, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to address you today regarding your work on the EdChoice voucher system and its viability, or lack thereof.

My name is Brandon Atwood, President of the Board of Education for the Norwood City School District and Technical Director for the Americas for OCSiAI, an advanced materials company with an office located here in Columbus. I am a product of the Ohio Common Public-School System.

HB9 is a piece of legislation that expands the EdChoice voucher program based on a school district's performance on the State Report Card. Let's be very clear, there is no constitutional obligation for Ohio children to receive state funds to attend private, charter or parochial schools that hold no financial accountability to the state. Nor do those institutions have to provide any instructional accountability, performance accountability, or equity to make sure that all students are being serviced. In fact, many school districts outside of the public-school setting have strict admittance requirements that would disqualify most of our youth from attending in the first place. If they make it through the admission process, and the student ends up requiring additional services, those private/charter/parochial schools are not equipped to handle students with special needs and invite the family to transition back to the public-school setting. Why is this the case? This is because public schools are obligated under Ohio law to provide an education for all admitted, regardless of their needs. Private/Charter/Parochial schools know this and take advantage of this by not building the infrastructure to handle all students.

We should not be here debating EdChoice, it should not be a topic of discussion because, again, there is no constitutional obligation for it. Instead we should be discussing other, more relevant policy issues. I would like to bring those policy issues to your attention because, ultimately, those issues will impact whatever the state legislature decides to do with this deeply flawed policy.

First, lets discuss the state defined graduation rate, which is discriminatory towards students with disabilities. Yes, I said discriminatory. Allow me to explain. Currently, the state puts students who meet the requirements for graduation AND receive a diploma into a 4-year or 5-year cohort. However, some students with disabilities have the opportunity to defer their graduation to take advantage of transitional pathway programing offered by the State through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Let me be very clear, these are students who meet the requirements for graduation. The issue is that this pathway programing is longer than one year, so these students when they receive their diploma, that they were eligible for in year 4, do not fall into either the 4- or 5-year cohort. So, they are considered as non-graduates by the state definition and labeled as non-graduates in their home district. This happens despite the fact that they still will receive a diploma.

What does this have to do with EdChoice? I am glad that you asked. Graduation rate is a critical component of the state report card, and heavily weighted in the High School building grade. It is also one of the select individual component scores that the EdChoice expansion language cites as putting a school on the list, regardless of the building or district grade. I have seen districts that have as few as 5-10 students, students with disabilities, defer their diplomas as allowed by Ohio law, and that action drops the graduation rate component grade by 2-3 letter grades. That is correct, you could go from a 'B' to an 'F' by following Ohio law. In addition, due to the fact of how the graduation rate is weighted, 5-10

students, who will ultimately receive their diplomas, will drop the overall building grade by at least one letter. It is discriminatory and shameful that we treat our students with disabilities this way. This flawed policy and flawed definition directly impacts whether a building could be or is placed on the voucher eligible list and needs to be addressed before anything happens with the voucher program.

Second, let's discuss the State Report Card system. A performance evaluation tool so deeply flawed and broken that it is already being looked at for change. This is a system that your colleagues can't defend, a system that the State Superintendent can't defend, and a system that is surgically turning the common public-school system into a caste society where school districts with a high median household income get recognized and rewarded and districts with lower median household incomes get labeled as failing. Honorable Senators and Representatives, I am going to be very honest with you, some of the best work is done by districts and educators in the lower income districts growing kids despite those kids facing massive environmental challenges completely unrelated to education every step of the way. Imagine having to come to work every day, teaching and growing kids, while those same children may not know if they are going to eat dinner when they go home or be able to turn on the lights. This situation happens every day in some districts that you label as failing. Sending those kids to a private/charter/parochial school is not going to solve the issues they face at home.

Until the State report card system is reformed from its caste societal correlation, there is no way that the report card system as it currently stands can accurately depict whether or not a school district is failing and should not be used as the basis for any voucher program eligibility.

Finally, let's touch on the biggest elephant in the room, the current unconstitutional funding formula. As I stand here today, we have surpassed 10,500 days since the funding formula has been legally ruled as unconstitutional. Instead of addressing adequately funding public education, we are debating taking more money away from public school districts in what many, including myself, deem as an illegal overreach by the state legislature to access a revenue stream previously unavailable to them.

The state has already handicapped districts by eliminating the TPP tax allocation. For the Norwood City School District, this was a revenue stream that accounted for 10% of our annual budget. With the stroke of a pen, this revenue source was eliminated and districts across the state were left holding the bag trying to figure out how to bridge the gap with the loss of this revenue source, and now the state wants to take more.

The way the current funding formula works, the state sets a dollar value available to the district per student. Then, depending on the local district's property values, the local district will receive a portion of the available funding. For example, districts with high property values can receive as little as \$700 per student from the state. Whereas districts with very low property values will receive closer to \$6000 from the state. Most districts will fall somewhere in between receiving approximately \$2500 from the state.

For High Schools, the vouchers are set at \$6000. If a student in an average district takes the voucher, the district will lose out on the \$2500, but then the district will have to cover the difference to make up the \$6000 voucher. Where do you think that \$3500 is going to come from? It will come from locally

collected property taxes. Constituents, including myself, did not vote on these property taxes for the state to come in and say we want to take that money from you so we can pay for a program that you did not vote on or approve. Ladies and gentlemen, this is theft, it is over-reaching and a gross abuse of power.

Until the state legislature solves the constitutionality of properly funding public schools, there should be no other programs under consideration, including EdChoice vouchers.

I would like to conclude with this... I invite you to reject HB9, or any other legislation involving EdChoice. I invite you to do the right thing and spend your time on policy that will make a difference. I invite you to take a stand and fight for Ohio's education system. Fix the graduation rate definition, solve the state report card debacle, and properly fund public education. Stop trying to fund voucher systems that discriminate and have no financial or performance oversight at the expense of public education and your constituents.

Thank you again for allowing me to address you today.