



HB 9 Conference Committee

Testimony for Brian Pendergest, Principal of Stephen T. Badin High School, Hamilton, Ohio

Chairman Jones and members of the Conference Committee for House Bill 9, thank you for allowing me to testify today on the importance of Ed Choice. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you the impact the EdChoice program has on our community. My name is Brian Pendergest and I have had the honor of being the Principal of Stephen T. Badin High School since the fall of 2010. I have been associated with Badin the majority of my life. Badin has changed over the years in the community it serves. As the only Catholic High School in Butler County, we have expanded the reach we have for those seeking a Catholic education for high school. At one time, the majority of our students came from the city of Hamilton but now we attract students from over 20 different zip codes. Only a third of our students come from Hamilton now.

However, those in the Hamilton area who seek a Catholic Education for their child want their children to attend Badin. Hamilton is still a blue collar town with many middle class families working hard to make ends meet. When we made the decision to become part of the EdChoice program, we did so to help families seeking a Catholic high school education for their children. We believe parents are the primary educators of their children. We want to partner with our parents to guide our students in their educational and spiritual journey. Parents have the right to determine which school environment is best for their child. Zip codes and income level should not be the deciding factor.

There are several inaccurate comments being made by our local public school districts with regards to how EdChoice scholarship will be utilized by Catholic Schools. The statements have been made that Catholic Schools will only take students who are academically gifted; that we have a selective admission process. I can assure you that is not the case at Stephen T. Badin High School. We accept students from all academic levels. We have four intervention specialists on our faculty to make sure the 65 students on IEPs are having their educational needs met and are experiencing success. We have students with a variety of academic challenges, hearing impaired students, and a student with Down Syndrome. The success and accomplishments of these students have only been possible through the continuation of the Jon Peterson Scholarship Program. These families are able to provide a Catholic education for their students utilizing state funds. The Peterson scholarship provides parents a choice for their child's education. All parents deserve the ability to choose where to send their child.

I would like to share a few stories of students who have benefited from the EdChoice program. All of these students are from Hamilton and would not qualify under the current income based portion of the program. I received the following email just this week:

"Income based vouchers do not provide a choice. The president of the school board in FF is saying only the well performing students will have a chance to apply for private education. I can tell you that Emily was a low b/c (maybe performing instead of b/c) student for the last three years. The fights and arguments that ensued were devastating to her self-esteem and well-being. I semester in Badin High School and she is carrying a 3.75, was student of the month and made honor roll second quarter. EdChoice has allowed me to breathe this year while I take advantage of my choice to send her to a school



that has created an environment that she can thrive in. “ This student was in the Hamilton City School District until this current school year.

One of the other misconceptions is that all families in a Catholic school are rich. That is not the case at Badin and most Catholic schools. Do we have families who are wealthy? Yes, we do, as do many public schools. However, we have a number of families who struggle to make ends meet. We have families who work multiple jobs in order to afford a Catholic education. We work hard to make it as affordable as we can for those families. As principal, one of my responsibilities is to work with our alumni and community partners to raise funds in order to provide financial aid to as many students as we can. Each year, we provide over \$400,000 in financial aid for our students but this still only meets less than 50% of the need. The following email I received expresses how EdChoice makes it possible for families to provide a Catholic education for those in a Catholic elementary school.

“I am a parent of an EdChoice Scholarship recipient for the current school year, 2019-20, at Stephen T. Badin High School. This scholarship couldn’t have come at a better time. As a person who attended Catholic schools through 8th grade, my parents were not able to afford to send me or my siblings to a Catholic high school. It was important to me to provide that opportunity for my children.

I now have six children of my own. Natalie, Lindy, and Tyler, my adult children all attended Stephen T. Badin High School. They each received some financial assistance which helped, but this is when our financial problems began. My husband and I both had good jobs with modest salaries, but it wasn’t enough. I am a Catholic elementary school teacher. I was hired at St. Ann Catholic School in 1989 and in 30 years, have never considered it a job. It was my ministry. At the age of 55, my husband took on a second job to help pay this tuition. We agreed that it was that important to keep our children in a Catholic High School. This worked for a while, but my husband experienced some medical issues, and was forced to quit this second job. Meeting the bills was hard once more. There was more than one time that our electric was turned off, our cable wouldn’t work, and I called and had our cell phones turned off. We borrowed from family members who disagreed with our determination to keep our kids in Catholic High School. After all, if we are borrowing money from them to make the bills, then we shouldn’t be sending them there...right?

After speaking with the administration at Stephen T. Badin, we were able to get some additional help to keep the kids at Badin. It was difficult for me to ask for this extra help, but I could not give up on the education I knew I wanted for my kids.

Fast forward 10 more years. Last year, my fifth daughter, Rachel, was in 8th grade at St. Ann. Anxiety over finances begins again. I currently have my name attached to nearly \$160,000 in college student loans, and we seem to have gotten nowhere on our mortgage....refinancing was necessary. What are we going to do? Rachel needs to be at Badin, but my husband is now 62 years old and I have my hands full with Emily, Stephanie, and my ministry at St. Ann.

Well, I received a letter in the mail regarding EdChoice. I am being offered a way for Rachel to attend a High School of her choice with a \$6000 scholarship. I re-read it to make sure I understood. Was this real? Were we being offered help for her to attend Badin? I literally cried when I realized that we would qualify for this. Relief came at exactly the right time. Loans we had taken against our very modest 401K



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accounts could be paid back. We could pay back family members from whom we had borrowed. We could breathe. This Ed Choice Scholarship was a true need. We felt like it was a reward for all of the determination and hard work we had put in to do the right thing for our children. I truly don't know how we would have survived without it.

Rachel is now in the second half of her freshman year. She has played volleyball, wrestled for the first time, and will be on the softball team in the spring. She has flourished academically, she has confidence and works hard. She knows it's a privilege to attend school at Badin. She is active in her faith and she continues to be a Eucharistic Minister. She has excellent teachers, and has made many new networks of good friends. Rachel NEEDS this scholarship. She needs to be at Stephen T. Badin High School. It is life changing. My older children are proof of it! Natalie is employed at GE aviation, Lindy is the office manager at Mason Vision Center, and Tyler flies out today for Boston for training in his new position with Amazon. I attribute this success to my kids, but also to the experience they had at Stephen T. Badin High School.

Please continue this needed EdChoice Scholarship program. It is truly life changing for the students and families who receive it." (Parent of a student on EdChoice. Attended a Catholic elementary school. Family lives in Hamilton.)

"To Whom it May Concern,

My name is Sarah Martin and I am writing to let you know how the Ed Choice Scholarship has helped my family. Having 5 boys, 3 at the elementary level and 2 at the high school level, this scholarship has enabled our boys to continue their Catholic education. Having 5 children in the Catholic Schools is a financial commitment that is hard on my family. I am a Catholic Elementary school teacher and my husband works in a factory. This scholarship has alleviated some of the financial stress for our boys to continue their Catholic Education. Badin High School has inspired my boys to live by their faith. My oldest child is a National Honor Society member, has carried at 3.9 or above all 3 years, and regularly participates in service projects. My freshman currently carries a 3.9, he is preparing to pick organizations to service. I feel that Badin high school encourages my boys to serve others and be the best version of themselves. I couldn't imagine having to uproot my boys to a different high school due to our finances. I hope my younger boys will get to experience Badin High School to nurture their Catholic Faith." Parent of Catholic School students at Badin and a local Catholic Elementary School.

There are countless stories like the two I included in my testimony. Parents know what is best for their child. Parents deserve the right to choose what type of educational environment is best for their child. The zip code or income of a parent should not be a determining factor in this decision. I encourage you to protect this right for all parents in Ohio and continue the EdChoice program as it was created by the legislature many years ago.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to submit my testimony in support of Ed Choice.

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