

MANCHESTER LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Troy D. Thatcher
Joel A. Hanson

130 Wayne Frye Drive
Manchester, Ohio 45144
Phone: (937) 549-4777
Fax: (937) 549-4744
www.mlsd.us



"Home of the Greyhounds"

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Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this evening regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program. I am Dr. Brian Rau, superintendent of the Manchester Local School District, located in the southern portion of Adams County. I am a product of our effective K-12 public education school system. I stand before you today to neither attack nor voice our concerns over the EdChoice Voucher program with respect to the program's ideologies and philosophies of our God-given right to choose. However, I am here to support SB89, the House's EdChoice amendment, and to voice our concerns regarding the criteria for eligibility requirements for becoming an EdChoice Voucher building. Our Board of Education and I support the SB89 version, because it does away completely with performance-based vouchers and moves the poverty-rate for income-based vouchers to 250%. In addition, SB89 makes the state-funded income-based voucher the vouchers utilized as opposed to the district-funded performance-based voucher. Furthermore, I have examined little to no evidence signifying that the utilization of local taxpayer dollars intended for public school districts to fund K-12 private educational institutions practices any type of fiscal accountability with respect to academia, especially when the vast majority of these institutions lack appropriate state accountability measures producing less than stellar results when compared to their public school district counterparts.

Although Manchester Local Schools does not have currently a school building designated as an EdChoice School, we are opposed to any legislation awarding EdChoice vouchers through a performance-based system. Should legislation continue to apply the "flawed" state report card as the basis for eligibility, it would only be a matter of time before one or both of our schools would join the 1200+ school buildings in the near future. I think we can all agree that there are not 1200+ failing school buildings representing over 24,000 inadequate public school educators in the state of Ohio. That thinking is just outright absurd. Since 2016, our school district has lost approximately \$4.7 million dollars in local tax revenue due to the closures of two coal power plants, as well as \$500,000 in federal funds, for a total loss of approximately \$5.2 million in four years. If our district had an EdChoice eligible school, we could lose at minimum an additional \$70,000. This may not seem like an enormous amount contrasted to other districts, but with an already reduced budget, further difficult decisions would remain imminent.

Rather than standing here today maintaining our district's stance on the EdChoice Voucher program, I prefer to provide three basic facts as to why the decision to provide performance-based vouchers with local tax dollars remains unjust. The first is FAPE. Many legislators believe FAPE is an acronym for Free "Above & Beyond" Public "or Private" Education. However, their perception is incorrect. FAPE represents Free Appropriate Public Education. FAPE is an educational right of all students, with and without a disability, in the United States. Parents forfeit their right to FAPE when they choose a private school rather than a public school. Coincidentally, mutually with the "public" portion forfeited, parents forfeit additionally the "free" segment of FAPE. The latter was the rationale legislation exercised when designing income-based EdChoice Vouchers. Moreover, if a district places a student in a private school because a school district cannot provide an appropriate education, the financial obligations for this placement are the sole responsibility of the school district. By contrast, if a school district affords FAPE, and the student's parents choose to place their child in a private school for whatever reason, the school district is not required to pay for that student's education in that particular private school. My brother and his wife choose to send my niece and nephew to a parochial school for valid reasons. However, they comprehend that their decision necessitates financial responsibilities on their part. This remains a consequence of choosing a private educational institution as opposed to a free appropriate public education.

The second fact pertains to our district's non-negotiable, "We accept each child as a capable individual." Public schools, unlike private and parochial schools, must educate every student who enrolls, regardless of socioeconomic status, the amount of academic skill deficits, how bad they smell, how dirty the clothes they wear, how severe the disability, those born addicted to drugs, those whom experience adverse childhood experiences, those whom experience trauma on a regular basis, and on and on and on. Public schools are unable to choose their clientele, our clientele chooses us, and we are forever grateful. Our district has approximately 21% of our student population, which the state mandates we assess, identified with a disability. For example, our fourth grade has 83 students. The percentage needed for proficiency with respect to report card measures requires that 80% of the students score proficient or higher on state assessments. We have 21 students identified with a disability in fourth grade. So, if every non-identified student scores proficient or higher, omitting the SWD, that still leaves us with under 75% proficiency rate, less than the 80% needed for proficiency. Furthermore, if you analyze assessment results statewide, you would find that the overwhelming majority not scoring proficient includes SWD. This is just one of numerous examples why establishing performance-based EdChoice Vouchers remains unjust, especially for rural and Appalachian school districts with a high population of SWD.

This leads me my third fact, which encompasses the inconsistency in accountability measures between public and private institutions. ODE and state legislators maintain high accountability measures, which I, for the most part, support, for public schools. State legislators should hold every K-12 entity that educates our youth to the exact same high standards, including the private and parochial schools, if the intention is make just and nondiscriminatory associations across the educational continuum. I think everyone can agree that this is not occurring in our society. We are only asking for equitable accountability measures. Former State Board of Education President Mr. Tom Gunlock stated that complaints regarding our "report card are bogus and education folks should spend more time helping kids meet the targets and less time worrying about how the report card makes them look." I am informing Mr. Gunlock that Manchester Local School District's top priority is, and always will be the safety and well-being of our students, followed by academics. However, with performance-based vouchers looming, we do not have a choice but to worry about our report card for fear of becoming one the 1,200+ EdChoice school buildings. Furthermore, Mr. Gunlock stated, "anything less than 100% of kids meeting 'the bar' is a failure." I assume "the bar" he refers is the 80% proficient rate for state assessments. I would like to invite Mr. Gunlock and all of the legislators to visit Adams County and Manchester Local School District. You will find the hardest, most dedicated group of professional educators in the state. Once you meet and interact with our students and observe their individual needs, you will see that public schools are not playing on the same equitable field as our private school counterparts. Only at that point, may you then look into the eyes of our teachers and inform them that they are failures.

In closing, these three are just a few of the many reasons that performance-based EdChoice Vouchers have no merit and discriminate against public school districts, especially districts located in rural Appalachia. Even with our challenges, Manchester Local School District remains a wonderful public school system with much to celebrate. Currently, we are proud to acknowledge that our schools earned "Independent" status, our elementary school received the Momentum Award for multiple continuous years, and our high school students excel in a range of academic competitions, including one of our students sending her summer enrichment project to the international space station this past fall. Additionally, we do have a good relationship with and support the Christian school in our county by furnishing transportation to and from the school, and soon we will be providing the Christian school a percentage of our federal funds, for which we will receive no reimbursement. Nonetheless, we support the belief of equitable treatment and accountability for all educational institutions, regardless if they represent the public or private educational sector. I urge you to rethink providing performance-based EdChoice Vouchers as an option for educating our youth, especially when it is a proven fact the vast disparity between accountability measures between the two educational options.

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide input regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program. I am happy to address your questions.