

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you today regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher Program. My name is Candace Sanchez and I am a Special Education teacher in the Middletown City School District. I myself am a product of public education and am also a proud parent of a second grade student who attends Miller Ridge Elementary in Middletown City Schools.

As a special education teacher, I have the pleasure of working with students of varying abilities. I teach an Intellectual Disabilities Unit and have 13 students in my class with a wide range of abilities and disabilities. These students range in age from 2nd-5th grade and are in my unit due to having extreme difficulty functioning in a general education setting. My students, who are special thinkers and special learners, would not have a fair chance at attending private school using the voucher program. Private schools do not offer all of the related services for special needs students. In public schools, students with special needs have an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) that ensures they are provided with yearly academic goals as well as necessary related services. These services include speech, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and counseling services. In private schools, students with special needs, if they are accepted in the first place, are not given IEPs, but are given generic service plans with limited services available to them. Private schools have the ability to handpick the EdChoice voucher applications they want to admit. Public schools provide education to all students. The inequity in this is appalling. Disabled students, among many others (poor, black, brown, hispanic, and English Language Learner students) are turned away at an alarming rate from private schools. Look at my 13 special learners and special thinkers. Do you think they would, one, be accepted into private schools, and two, be provided the same amazing services that we are able to offer them at public schools? In Middletown alone, roughly 30 students were denied admittance to the private school of their choice using their EdChoice vouchers. If EdChoice vouchers are meant to be available for all students, it's not being reflected in the acceptance by private schools.

Let's take a moment to talk about failure. This word, which is used to describe a large number of public schools in Ohio, is not what I see everyday in the classrooms in the Middletown City School District. As I teach my special needs students, I do not think of the word failure. In fact, other words provide a more accurate description; tenacity, determination, growth, possibility, and success. I see the hard work these students put in and I get the absolute joy of seeing the amazing results these students produce everyday.

*Jamarion, who has improved two grade levels in reading since August, is not a failure.

*Enrique, who grew 16 points on his math Map test in 4 months, is not a failure.

*Trinity, who has learned to count money and make change, is not a failure.

*Julianna, who is successfully transitioning into General Education from a special education unit, is not a failure.

I know we keep talking about the same word, failure, but it seems our definitions are quite different. The current report card system, which has deemed so many public schools as failures, and somehow overlooks holding any accountability to private schools, is extremely flawed and does not accurately represent the growth being made within our public school system. Reform needs to be made regarding Ohio's Report Card System and basing voucher eligibility on these faulty results. I am pro accountability for all schools, as long as the tool of measurement is accurate.

Speaking of reform, the voucher system needs to transition from the failing schools approach to the income based approach. With such a large number of public schools considered failing, it is apparent that the measuring tool is flawed. How can we allow local taxpayers, like myself, to pay for vouchers that were determined to be eligible based on a broken rating scale? I did not give permission for the use of my tax dollars, which are meant for my public school students, to be used to pay for private school tuition. The income based approach is a much healthier option because it prioritizes low income students.

In summary, I believe there is a solution to the failed report card system and the inequity of the EdChoice voucher program. This solution is reform. I support a plan that reforms the current report card system. I support a plan that ends the failed schools model for vouchers and moves to an income-based approach which prioritizes low-income kids. I support a plan that holds private schools, who accept EdChoice vouchers, to the same accountability standards as Ohio Public Schools. I support Senate Bill 89.

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 89 Conference Committee, thank you for allowing me to speak on the topic of Ohio's EdChoice Voucher Program. I want to take a moment to thank the House of Representatives for supporting Senate Bill 89. I would like to close with one final question, to the Senate, will you do the same? Thank you for taking into account those that cannot stand up and speak for themselves. Thank you for taking into account my 13 students. Supporting reform shows you support the the public school students of Ohio, every last one of them.

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