

February 18, 2020

HB 9 Conference Committee

Testimony of Dr. Cy Smith, Superintendent of Mansfield Christian School

Chairman Jones and Members of the Conference Committee,

Mansfield Christian School has participated in the EdChoice Scholarship Program since its inception in 2005-2006 in order to make Christian education a reality for those not commonly served by private schools. My name is Dr. Cy Smith, Superintendent of Mansfield Christian School. I am an alumnus of the school and this is my 29<sup>th</sup> year in education. Along with the Superintendent of Worthington Christian, I serve as one of two state of Ohio school representatives for ACSI (the Association of Christian Schools International) representing 109 Christian schools statewide. I serve as a school accreditation commissioner for the Mid-America region of ACSI, in order to ensure that our private schools are not only meeting state standards, but exceeding them in order to provide an exceptional school experience for families that aligns with our mission. I also represent close to 50 schools in northeast Ohio as president of the Greater Cleveland Christian Administrator's Association.

Mansfield Christian School enrolls 502 students this year, residing in 19 different districts across six counties in north central Ohio. A total of 186 students, or 40%, are enrolled using one of the EdChoice scholarships. We also participate in the John Peterson Program that services 25 of our students with special needs in grades K-12. Contrary to public opinion, our schools seek to serve as broad of a spectrum of students as possible working within the parameters of our mission. Indeed, we are blessed that Ohio's state funding supports for private schools are among the best in the country. Most of our schools follow all state and federal regulations, including standardized testing, in order to access the available funding sources and subsequently admit students from varying socio-economic backgrounds and academic conditions. Our schools commonly work to keep tuition charges in-line with the costs per student. With tuition ranging from roughly \$5,000-\$11,000 in most of our schools across the state, we are not economically elitist institutions. Parent surveys show that we are predominately made up of middle-class families that have chosen to add private school tuition to their family budget, in addition to funding their local public schools with property tax dollars.

Christian schools like Mansfield Christian are transforming students' lives across the state of Ohio. I have received dozens of emails, letters, and phone calls through the years from parents that are extremely thankful for the opportunity they have received from the scholarship program. Most consider the program an answer to prayer and they express at length their appreciation for our willingness to participate. As one of the original providers of the EdChoice Scholarship, I can see that the attention this issue is now receiving due to the public school assessment measures and eligibility, has made cloudy the fundamental premises of the program.

Suddenly, the narrative has become that of private schools stealing public funds and schools suffering as the result. This is simply not true. If this were indeed the case, EdChoice would have been abandoned during the recession ten years ago as the population of both the state and our schools declined rapidly. We know that education contains both fixed costs and variable costs. Studies that examine the savings and costs of America's private school programs, such as Martin Lueken's, *Fiscal Effects of School Vouchers* (2018)\*, demonstrate the significance of these costs to this discussion. The fixed costs for education remain stable whether a child is enrolled in a particular school or not, such as utilities, maintenance, and administrative expenses (approx.. \$5,000 per student in Ohio). Variable costs are those directly connected to the student such as the teacher, curriculum, and other needed resources (approx.. \$8,000 in Ohio). The variable costs leave when a student leaves and the district does not spend that money. In Ohio, fittingly, those variable costs may be sent to a private school in the form of a voucher for that student ranging from \$4,650-\$6,000. Leuken's analysis demonstrated that in Ohio, as in other voucher states, as long as the amount deducted from the state's per pupil contribution is less than the per student variable costs, there is no net financial harm to the public school. The costs to the public school go down by an amount greater than the loss of the scholarship amount. In fact, the district saves money and may increase the per pupil expenditures for those who remain because it keeps the fixed cost allocation as well as the difference between the voucher amount and the variable costs. No fiscal analysis of any voucher programs in the United States that accounts for both costs and savings, has found that these programs result in a net negative fiscal impact on taxpayers.

Perhaps there are issues of validity with the assessment measures and the performance indicators for school eligibility should be reevaluated, but the program is not financially harmful to public schools, nor has this been the case for the past 15 years. It behooves us to consider the program effective in its original intent and separate the formula for eligibility from this discussion moving forward.

Let us not overturn a program that does so much good for so many families that otherwise would never have access to schools that align with their values and the educational purposes for their children. In this sense, I concur with those prior testimonies that emphasized fit over eligibility. Families do not necessarily leave a public school simply because they are eligible. If this were true, private school enrollment should have increased significantly in the last 15 years in Ohio and across the country, but this has not been the case. Private Christian schools exist for a specific mission; most commonly to serve as an extension of the Christian home and church in teaching and training students from a biblical worldview. At no point during the admissions process, are EdChoice scholarship families considered outside of this purpose. If the values of the family and student fit the mission, then our schools work tirelessly to succeed with the child. Mansfield Christian School has graduated 129 EdChoice scholarship students over 15 years. Only after these students were afforded an educational choice and the priority of missional fit resolved, did these families commit to an MCS education.

As you are well aware, choice has become a hallmark of our society in virtually every field and endeavor. Parents reside in communities with multiple choices and schooling is no exception.

The greater the choices, the larger the population. Cutting this program in anyway or making reductions that severely limit the program in some manner, will set the state back as a national player in educational advancement and innovation. On behalf of those of us leading private, Christian schools across the state of Ohio, we have no desire to see our educational system regress to a “one size fits all” approach based on circumstantial geography. Rather, we ask and implore our legislators to resolve this issue by separating the assessment measures in a manner that honors the original intent and effectiveness of the voucher program – that is, allowing parents to access public funding for the freedom to choose a private school.

Thank you for your time and attention.

**\*<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Fiscal-Effects-of-School-Vouchers-by-Martin-Lueken.pdf>**

