

OHIO GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
Conference Committee on House Bill 9  
Testimony by  
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Chair Jones and Conferees, I am Eric Resnick, a member of the Canton City School District Board of Education, and it is my honor to be here this evening giving testimony on this highly consequential matter.

I am not going so far as to consider my testimony proponent or opponent, as I frankly, consider the EdChoice measure in the budget to be an insult to public school districts and to the Ohio Constitution that creates them.

I am not in the camp that views SB 89 as a solution, either. The voucher plan in SB 89 is different, but still devastating to school districts like mine, and as such, should also be rejected.

94 percent of Ohio's K-12 students attend public schools that are part of constitutionally created public school districts, all except three of which are governed by elected boards of education. (We can talk about the three at a later time.) The democratically elected boards ensure the districts reflect the communities they serve, and that there is no taxation without representation. The Ohio Constitution also creates the general assembly, so we're related.

We have an obligation as elected officials to do good public policy in the best interest of the most people. In that realm, both income-based and so-called performance-based vouchers fail Ohioans, most especially those who live in high poverty communities. In Ohio's cities that generally also means people of color.

While there may be some Orwellian satisfaction in being able to point to a few individuals who may say they well-served by schools that accept vouchers, the overwhelming majority are hurt. To emphasize that point, this general assembly has consistently shielded voucher schools from scrutiny.

Even the pro-private school Thomas B. Fordham Foundation finds that voucher students in private schools performed worse than their public school counterparts in reading and math,

Private schools can and do "cherry pick" which students they accept, and more importantly, which students they keep. Public school districts, as Constitutional creatures, serve all.

Private school students do not have to take the same required state tests as their public school counterparts. So much for accountability with public funds!

97% of voucher schools are religious. That means, at worst, the state is forcing public school districts to pay for religious education. At least, it means the state is diverting money from public school districts to pay for religious education. Both of these scenarios is likely to run afoul of the U.S. Constitution. If I were smarter I might read this complaint filed by Citizens for Community Values on behalf of religious schools, as they certainly think it does, and they think they are entitled to it.

Religious schools, again with public money, can and do exempt themselves from non-discrimination laws, both in terms of their employees, and the students they serve and their families. Public money should never be used to flout non-discrimination laws. It's undemocratic. It's unjust.

On February 10, Speaker Householder was on *Sound of Ideas* on WCPN, and he said, "The voucher system has changed, and how it has changed is in order to try to make more children eligible, advocates for choice have come out and tried to lobby for more and more punitive standards on public schools in order to make these buildings..."

He continued, "The harder you make testing on public school kids, the more children are available to try to get into their [private] school systems. And so, it becomes a sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy that our public schools continue to look like they're getting worse."

Please don't tell the Speaker I agree with him, but I do, and he's right.

The next thing he said was an even bigger truth bomb.

The Speaker described how you, as legislators "tweak" the rules to keep buildings in your districts off these lists, when he said, "The only thing left on this list are poor Appalachian schools and black urban schools."

That's a truth bomb. He didn't stop there.

He added, "Black urban schools and Appalachian schools have been putting up with this for a long, long time."

Yes, we have!

One of my objections is that the solution some want to see would keep preferred buildings off the list, at the same time, make more vouchers

available in poor Appalachian schools and black urban schools, as the Speaker notes.

My school district is the latter, and were I more conspiratorial, I might think you are trying to do us in!

We need fewer total vouchers, preferably none. We don't need the embarrassment of affluent, whiter districts to be relieved by shifting more burden to us.

In the world of school districts, money is opportunity for students. Period.

As a high poverty urban district, we are educating the most expensive students in the state. We have always viewed creating educational choices within our school district to be the bedrock of those opportunities.

Vouchers put those choices at risk because they are expensive, and require economies of scale. Smaller districts cannot create these opportunities because the cost per student is prohibitive. Size matters, and vouchers of all kinds threaten size and district capacity.

Our district poverty goes beyond individual students. Our local tax base has little capacity. We are among the poorest local tax bases in the state. We are dependent on state support for almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  of our general revenue funds. If those funds disappear, we can't make it up by raising the property taxes on our residents who don't have it to give. The Canton City School District lost \$700,000 this year in federal Title I funds – funds that are meant for poverty mitigation. If we want to continue meeting those student needs, we have to have to make tough educational choices.

Some perspective, we have a 7.9 mil levy on the ballot next month, which, if passed, will generate only \$5.1 million, and it is a stretch for much of our community to be able to afford it. Last year we cut \$7.6 million in preparation for the difficult decision of raising taxes.

As the state of Ohio moves closer to school funding models without guarantees, without compensation for our impoverished tax base, that are based almost totally on student enrollment, you can see how any all vouchers are just plain cruel, and will take Ohio's most challenging school districts back to the pre-DeRolph days, only this time Ohio's neediest, most expensive students are in districts where the resources are being ripped away by private schools that are not held to the same standards. That is the wrong policy choice for all of Ohio, and you have the chance to correct it now. The 94% of Ohio's students in public school districts need you to get this right.

That, by the way, is the lede on this testimony, and I hope you understand it, and ask me about it.

And I would like to correct the record from a witness two days ago who misled you when she asserted that Catholic schools have invested a lot of money in poor school districts, hence, saved school districts a lot of money.

That assertion is pure nonsense, and I suspect the witness knows it is because she was asking for you to transfer the capacity school districts achieve through economy of scale, to her schools. As our kids say, "Busted!"

I have no qualm with religious schools. We have always had them. When I was a kid I had friends who attended them. But they paid for it themselves. That was their families' choice. How did it get to this point where those who opt out of the public schools are entitled to this form of taxpayer supported welfare?

I am going to close by sharing what educational choice looks like in the Canton City School District right now.

Students can choose AIM Academy, a preschool through grade 8 "balanced calendar" or year round school, where all students learn Spanish and have individual iPad technology and enrichment during the intercessions.

Students can choose Arts Academy, a Kindergarten through grade 8 performing arts academy. Our gifted students also attend there. Arts Academy came within a few points of being a National Blue Ribbon School last year, and may well nail it this year.

Middle school students can choose STEAMM Academy. STEAMM is what happens when we add arts and medical studies to the basic STEM curriculum. It stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Music, and Medicine. I am particularly proud of STEAMM Academy because as a board member I helped to create it. It is one of a hand full of Ohio schools that earned the National STEM designation, which is a high honor. STEAMM Academy is 100% project-based learning.

Canton City Schools high school students can choose Timken Early College High School, which is a partnership with Stark State College. It is designed to serve students who may not be gifted, but who can handle rigor, and who are generally the first in their family to attend college. Timken Early College High School students study at Stark State with college students. During their senior year, all of their studies are at Stark State. All earn college credit, and around 70% earn Associate Degrees, even before they nation, and ours is always among the top rated.

Do you know what all of these student choices have in common?

They are really expensive!

College textbooks cost the district a lot of money. Project-based learning requires a lot of expensive materials. Performing arts education requires specialized professional expertise, equipment and facilities. Year round school is expensive.

The Canton City School District can do all of these things today because of our size and our capacity.

Vouchers threaten both.

The high pressure sales tactics the voucher schools use on our families, promising them what they cannot deliver, and are not required to demonstrate, put the educational choices offered in the public interest, by an accountable, elected school board subject to Ohio's Sunshine Laws, created by the Ohio Constitution, to serve all students and our community.

I can't think of a more dangerous public policy.

Ohio needs fewer voucher gimmicks, and stronger public school districts with the capacity to create high quality intra-district choices.

Neither piece of legislation you are considering does that, which is why I ask that you take the time to craft a third alternative that reduces the total number of vouchers and plough the savings into high quality public education, as the Ohio Constitution requires you to do.

I am happy to take questions.

