



House Bill 9 Conference Committee Testimony
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Chair Jones, and members of the Conference Committee, my name is Kevin Bacon, President & CEO of School Choice Ohio (SCO). Thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 9. Specifically, I am here to speak to you regarding provisions that impact the EdChoice Scholarship Program.

SCO is a statewide organization that assists parents with finding the best educational options available for their children and advocates for quality educational options for every Ohio child. We work to empower families to choose the best learning environment for their children, whether it is a traditional public school, private school, charter school, or through virtual or blended learning or homeschooling. For some families that option is an EdChoice Scholarship. SCO doesn't think that EdChoice is the only solution to providing a good school choice option. EdChoice is one of a variety of options in Ohio including the Jon Peterson Scholarship, Autism Scholarship, Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Programs, career and technical programs, College Credit Plus dual enrollment program, private schools, homeschooling, STEM programs, magnet

schools and open enrollment. We interact directly with parents to improve outcomes for all students, regardless of where they are educated.

Created by the Ohio General Assembly in 2005, the EdChoice Scholarship Program has empowered thousands of families to find the right school for their children. The traditional EdChoice program, often referred to as the struggling schools' model, identifies schools as 'EdChoice eligible' based on meeting one or more report card accountability measures. In 2012, the legislature updated eligibility criteria to better align with the school report card system and buildings' grade levels. The three-year safe harbor period (14-15, 15-16 and 16-17 school years) requested by districts and passed by the legislature, gave school districts time to adjust to new tests and delayed implementation of the EdChoice eligibility criteria until the 2018-19 school year (using the 2017-18 report card data). Based on the most recent school report card, approximately one-third of school buildings continue to struggle with one or more performance measures, making their students eligible to receive a scholarship for the 2020-21 school year.

Although it has been said that the expanded list of EdChoice eligible schools was something slipped into the budget last year, the truth is that the eligibility criteria are the same today as they have been for years. The criteria used most recently is the same as was used last year.

We've heard many times that the number of EdChoice eligible schools are ballooning by more than 400% in a year. Again, the facts are not nearly so dramatic. Yes, the number of eligible schools most recently increased from 519 to 1,227. Although a substantial increase, it is not a 400% increase.

Today we find ourselves discussing what this program will be going forward. Proposals range from limiting eligibility, subsidies to districts, and a shift to income-based eligibility immediately. Some of the proposals are more benign than others.

In addition to House Bill 9, the House of course passed SB 89, and as such its components are very relevant to this discussion as well. Of particular concern in SB 89 is language that would not only limit growth going forward but effectively reduce the current number of scholarships by approximately 45%. The inclusion of that proposal in this bill could result in nearly 19,000 students losing their scholarship for the 2020-21 school year.

We support shifting EdChoice to an income-based program if it is done without a reduction in current eligibility. As such, we hope that the General Assembly will proceed in such a way that will not reduce the number of students eligible for a voucher. With the elimination of the traditional EdChoice scholarship many of these students will be eligible under the income-based scholarship. Numerically, this will be an overall reduction in the number of students eligible to receive a voucher under Senate Bill 89. In addition to raising the federal poverty level, funding must be adequate to support the

added students using the income-based voucher. Raising the federal poverty level is helpful only to the degree that the program is funded.

We encourage members of the General Assembly to proceed with caution so as not to cause disruption to these families in need. We ask that you hold all of the parents harmless if they currently have a child who is eligible. We would further ask that all of their children remain eligible so that siblings are not being split up into different schools. Small baby steps, perhaps, is the best approach now as we can continue to work on this issue after the current enrollment period.

Whatever is done, we would also encourage the General Assembly to come to a decision sooner rather than later. Disruption to these families is real. We continue to receive calls from parents left in limbo. I know they would appreciate knowing how they should proceed with this important decision in their lives.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony. I am happy to answer questions at this time.