



Catholic Conference of Ohio

Feb. 19, 2020
Conference Committee/HB9
Room 313/Rife Center
Interested Party

Good afternoon Chairman Jones, Rep. Edwards, Rep. Robinson, Sen. Peterson, Sen. Huffman and Sen. Fedor. My name is Larry Keough. I am the associate director at the Catholic Conference of Ohio and legislative advocate for Catholic schools.

The Catholic Conference of Ohio represents the Catholic Bishops in matters of public policy. This testimony represents the Conference's position on school choice and our EdChoice related recommendations for this Committee to consider.

Background

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Catholic Conference of Ohio have championed parental choice in education for decades.

We believe parents are the first and foremost educators of their children and as such, are best suited to determine which schools are right for their children.

Catholic schools represent the largest segment of chartered nonpublic schools in Ohio and the largest percentage EdChoice scholarship recipients in the state. Over 63 percent of the students using traditional EdChoice and EdChoice Expansion scholarships this year are using them to attend Catholic schools.

In many respects, our participation in choice programs is an extension of our mission to reach out to poor, and vulnerable students, including those who are at-risk and may have a disability.

We understand concerns raised about the number of public schools identified as low-performing on the original 2020-2021 List of Designated Public Schools published in January by the Ohio Department of Education. None of us want our school labeled as "low-performing," especially when by other reliable measures, this label is inaccurate and unfair. We agree the state report card used to assess the performance of public schools should be retooled such that it is fair and equitable for all public schools.

Our Position on the EdChoice Scholarship Programs

Our position on EdChoice is not aligned with HB 9 or SB 89. In our letter (February 7) to members of the General Assembly, we support elements of the House plan and Senate plan.

Ohio's EdChoice scholarship programs make it possible for families with limited financial resources, working class families, and families trapped in **truly** low-performing public schools to exercise choice in the education their children receive. These scholarship programs should be continued.

We make the following recommendations:

- **Grandparent present scholarship recipients and their siblings**
Changes in the current scholarship programs should grandparent present scholarship recipients and their siblings. The education of students currently attending our schools on scholarship should not be interrupted, and parents should be able to keep their children together in the same school.
- **Provide the least possible further disruption for families counting on EdChoice**
For families who are already in the throes of uncertainty because of changes and proposed changes in the law, there should be the least possible further disruption. Many families, relying on the EdChoice law on the books in January, already enrolled their children in a nonpublic school for next year or are the process of doing so. They are counting on their eligibility for a scholarship
- **Increase the eligibility threshold for EdChoice Expansion to 300 percent above federal poverty guidelines**
For families to qualify for the Ed Choice Expansion Program, the eligibility threshold should be increased to 300 percent above federal poverty guidelines. The current limit of 200 percent of poverty does not reach working class families.
- **Provide traditional EdChoice for poor and working-class families in *truly* low-performing public schools**
Traditional EdChoice (however the General Assembly decides to fund it) should remain in place, in 2020/2021 and beyond, for poor and working class families whose children do not qualify for an EdChoice Expansion scholarship and whose children would be assigned to a **truly** low-performing public school. We offer this recommendation based on our concern that children from lower middle-income families would fall through the cracks. Their family income may exceed 300 percent of poverty, but they are unable to pay tuition at a nonpublic school. (i.e., EdChoice Expansion Scholarships should be awarded before traditional EdChoice)
- **Provide sufficient and stable funding**
The EdChoice programs need sufficient and stable funding. Parents whose children attend school on EdChoice scholarships should be able to depend on the availability of those scholarships for the duration of their children's K-12 education. At the same time, serious consideration should be given to financing traditional EdChoice through something other than a deduct from district funds.

Catholic schools and public schools share a common purpose. For years we have been partners in the important work of educating Ohio's children. We urge the General Assembly to resolve differences between the House and Senate versions of the Ed Choice Scholarship system soon. Parents need to decide where to enroll their children in school. Schools – nonpublic and public -- need to make decisions about teachers, contracts and budgets. Every day that goes by makes the situation more difficult for everyone.

Attached to this testimony is the letter we sent to all members of the General Assembly on February 7. Also attached are points that address several misconceptions regarding chartered nonpublic schools that have arisen repeatedly in testimony over the past few weeks.

Thank you. At this time, I would be pleased to answer any questions.