

REYNOLDSBURG CITY SCHOOLS

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Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program. My name is Melvin J. Brown, superintendent of the Reynoldsburg City School District.

I am here to testify this evening to share testimony about the EdChoice Voucher program. As it currently constructed, the EdChoice program creates some fundamental fairness problems for Districts all across this state. I would like to share some of those perspectives to provide you with context that you may not have yet considered.

For those of who do not know, Reynoldsburg is a moderately sized district of about 7800 students that is an eastside suburb of Columbus. As of this year, despite improvement on our drastically flawed state report card mechanism, every school in my District, except our high school, became identified as EdChoice designated schools for performance-based scholarships. There is no rationale that make me understand why a school district with improved results has a greater degree of "penalty".

Let me first say to the committee, that I, nor my District, decry a parent's choice for their child's education and have no problem with educational competition. In fact, I welcome it as we know the high quality education that Reynoldsburg City Schools can provide and that it compares quite favorably with options our families have in our area.

EdChoice, as currently constructed, threatens the very existence of public education in Ohio. To begin, this legislation should not be built on the backs of school districts that are identified as "failing" based on a metric that everyone in this room knows is dramatically flawed and untenable. It makes zero sense to make these types of decisions based on a system that is not, has not, and has never sought to be adequate enough to provide relevant, accurate depictions of school districts. No one in this state can convince me that we have over 1200 failing schools in our state. That is absolutely absurd and is directly tied to a far from adequate state report card system that only highlights the one to one correlation between achievement and wealth. I would go so far as to argue that we have not even considered a real idea of what "failing" means.

Public funds, by definition, should not be funneled to private institutions. When last I checked, ballot language does not identify individual families or students to receive funds from levies upon which its community votes. Ballot language very specifically identifies the school district as the recipient of those funds. When my community goes to the polls to act on proposed levies and ballot issues, they do so on behalf of and in support of the entire school district. The notion of "the money follows the kid" is a fallacy and an excuse to privatize public education. Inherent in the fabric of public education is that it is for every student. Good schools improve communities and raise property values. To tell schools that a making remarkable strides that, although they play a tremendous role in the value that its community gets from its property, they are not

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entitled to the tax revenue borders on being illegal. This notion of providing choice to this measure is only going to result in the continued resegregation of our schools allowing people to pick and choose which students with whom their children attend school. This bill touts a desire to provide choice and options to families. How is this accurate when this same bill will result in the stripping of resources and programs that currently reside in public schools for all students? This bill will force schools to dismantle and eliminate those programs as they will not have the financial backing to sustain them. As you already know, many districts, including my own, are identified as capped districts who do not receive funds for numbers of students who reside within their borders. This factor is not being weighed or considered appropriately.

When there are genuine concerns about failing schools that need to be raised, I am more than in favor of having those discussions and providing options. But, I will also implore you to convince me that private options are universally better than public schools and to provide the metrics by which you reach that conclusion. Even our state's charter schools have some measure of accountability that is similar to that of the public school model. Private schools are not measured by the same level of accountability as public schools and are able to pick and choose what students they want to accept. In fact, private schools are not measured by any level of true accountability. Public schools do not have and do not want those options. If you are going to "compare" public and private schools, and support them with public monies, then utilize identical, or at least comparable measures, to level the playing field and provide accurate comparisons based on real data. If that is our vehicle, then I say "GAME ON" and I will wholeheartedly welcome the competition and say to you and others to "watch us do this work!"

Now I must confess, that my district will probably not be impacted very adversely by the current iteration of EdChoice legislation. In fact, we could benefit financially when we consider that we turn away about 200 open enrollment applications each year. One may then ask, "well, then what are you complaining about?" The answer to that is quite simple. We are exactly the type of district that should be providing context as we could potentially benefit from this legislation and yet we still see it as an inherent threat to the institution that is public education. Similar to the state report card conversation, only when those "high-performing" districts began to make noise, was the conversation given real credence by the legislature. It is my responsibility as an advocate for public education to fight this threat and I will continue to do so on behalf of public schools across Ohio. Your committee must understand that Ohio schools in 2020 are better than they have ever been in the history of this state. We educate and graduate more students yearly. We provide educational opportunities for students never before imagined. We provide supports and accommodations that allow all students, regardless of their backgrounds or their levels of marginalization, to equitably participate in and benefit from education. We have more students entering college and successfully preparing for careers that do not even exist as of yet. I implore you to halt the

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expansion of this current legislation and demonstrate the level of respect for public education that it deserves. In summation, I ask you to consider supporting House version of Senate Bill 89. While the bill does not address all of our concerns and has room for improvement, it is the best solution thus far. My suggested improvements to the legislation are as follows:

- Set the eligibility level at 200% of the federal poverty level
- Provide funding to offset losses due to exponential voucher growth
- Establish meaningful and equitable accountability measures for private schools that accept vouchers
- Funding for private schools should be the responsibility of the state and not of the individual districts and localities

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 conference committee, I thank you for this opportunity to provide input regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program. I am happy to address your questions.

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