

Chairman Jones and members of the Conference Committee on House Bill 9,

My name is Michelle Novak. I serve on the Middletown City School District board of education. I am also a parent of four children. My children used to attend private schools. I also educated them at home using online schools. I resisted sending them to public school. 1. Because I didn't appreciate the public school experience that I had. 2. Because I wanted my children to get a religious education that reflected my values.

My family moved to Middletown in 2007 because we liked the community and it didn't matter to us that the schools were "failing" because we weren't going to use them anyway. We ran into an issue though at the private school. We found that it did not adequately support one of my son's learning styles and it began to affect his self-esteem. We had to do something. We considered moving out of Middletown to a public school district that was not failing because we believed what the state told us and we wanted better for our children. Fortunately, our realtor, and friend who is a long time Middletown resident, advised us to check out the local district first. His children tested as gifted and attended Middletown public schools. They later went on to receive Ivy League degrees. His wife was also a nationally recognized educator in Middletown schools. We had never been in the schools before. Dan Ward convinced us to take a tour. I went to our neighborhood school and the principal was amazing, structured, driven, with high expectations for her teachers and for her students. They had a gifted program. They had band and orchestra. But the kids I saw were not the kids I was used to. They seemed messy. There were no uniforms. Some of them smelled like cigarette smoke. Some were visibly disabled. Some of them had messy hair and disheveled clothing. And the school was much bigger than what I was used to. What I realize now was that I was seeing poverty. I had been insulated from it in my private school world. It was shocking to see this in my community in a way I hadn't seen it before. We continued our search for houses outside the district, but Dan and I continued to talk and I continued my research. I discovered a non-traditional public elementary school in Middletown. They had multiage classrooms. They relied on growth assessments and not grades. They also provided extra intervention support and access to a gifted program. It was perfect for my son. And my other child I knew would do well anywhere. I was concerned about whether or not they could challenge him. His teachers told me they could and to trust them. I did. At one point though the school had a funding shortfall. They would discontinue the program my son was in. I didn't like the approach the administration had decided to take. And I considered again moving my children, but instead I decided to work with the schools. I ran for school board. And I became the biggest advocate for public schools in my community. I have come to understand the challenges of public urban districts. And I have come to see the strengths. This education system is not comparable to private schools, to charter schools, or even to wealthy suburban districts. The staff must be able to support the whole child and recognize the uniqueness in each child. Sometimes a lot of intervention and support was necessary just to get them to a place where they can achieve in school. It is expensive to do that and the results aren't always apparent in the overall achievement. We have food programs, we have mental health, medical, dental, and vision resources available at school to support students. Our greatest resource is our staff who is charged with the responsibility of meeting each student where they are, building an authentic relationship with them, and helping them to

set goals for a life that many kids have never been able to imagine for themselves. And then to get them there. The administration supports the staff in this noble mission. And my children have benefited from those relationships. I now have one child who has graduated and is starting her own business. Another child who is a senior and is enlisted in the Navy Nuclear engineering program scoring a perfect score on the Navy aptitude assessment. My next child is in 8th grade and is scoring in the 99th percentile nationally for both Language arts and Math on our MAP tests we use in our district. In 8th grade he is taking tenth grade math. My youngest is getting personal attention from his teachers and is growing rapidly, he likes schools, and is an amazing athlete and gymnast. We consider our teachers our family. Not only academically are my children excelling but they are getting a value based education. They are learning empathy. Different is normal in Middletown. We have students with disabilities, with different primary languages, families with different socioeconomic statuses, children who have experienced severe trauma, and children of all races and religions. This diversity teaches my children life lessons that will help them to be contributors in a meaningful way within a diverse workforce, as leaders, or as lawmakers. They will be able to understand people from firsthand experience with people. Not everything has been perfect along the way. But as parents and community members, we have access to the administration. We have transparency and policy to address concerns. And when we don't like the result, instead of moving my kids somewhere else, we have a locally elected board of our peers who we can escalate the issues to. I ran for school board because I supported the teachers who supported my children and I thought as a district we could do better to support our front line staff. Others felt the same way and ran for office. And in four years, we have a completely new culture in Middletown schools. We have a strategic plan that is staff led. We empower our staff to be innovative and creative to better meet the needs of our students. Our growth measures are good and continue to improve. We are taking students who are coming to us two years behind and growing them 1.5 years each year to help them get caught up. We are providing new pathways in aviation, coding and game design, Virtual reality, and licensing opportunities for students. Students are helping in the design process for the introduction of new classes that meet the educational requirements and are more engaging. Student have a voice. We have partnerships with Butler tech and Miami University to deliver some of these innovative new programs. Our graduation rate is rising every year. It's at 91%. We have momentum. We have a movement. The Middie Modernization Movement. We are a nationally recognized school district for innovation. #MiddieRising We should be the pride of the state of Ohio with what we are doing. But instead, the state is throwing hurdles in front of us and doesn't recognize what we are doing. And the same goes for many urban, rural, and suburban districts across the state. Frankly, the state has not kept up with schools. The state continues to use an outdated system of measuring success that doesn't even align with what businesses and employers are looking for. The Ohio department of education released a new strategic plan that looks at the whole child. We like that plan and so instead of just complaining about an outdated accountability system, the Ohio School board association Urban Network of which I am a representative from my district resolved to introduce a new quality profile that schools could opt in to. It's based on the ODE strategic plan. We are getting ready to test a pilot now. It is something that we believe would be more reflective of what a successful educational experience looks like. Among other hurdles beyond changing assessments and graduation requirements is a funding formula that capped our district. It costs

more to educate our children because of the life barriers that our kids have and we never received the full funding from the state and always had to make due with what we had. Even so, we did well within those constraints. We had cash carryover reserves and were not looking at a levy anywhere down the road. Not once did the state ask if maybe we weren't meeting the achievement goals because we never received the full funding for our students which means there were always supports that weren't there. This summer the state froze our funding while simultaneously expanding our responsibility for paying for kindergartners who never attended our district to go to parochial schools. Two of our most successful elementary schools qualified for vouchers this year because of safe harbor that used 2013 data. Regardless of losing students, our student enrollment grew. And we didn't get funding for that growth or the kindergartners we were now paying for. And we are dealing with a lack of space in our newly constructed buildings because of our growth. And now, this hurdle, this talk brick wall: the continuing expansion of the EdChoice scholarships. Our district will go through our cash reserves, making significant cuts, and we will be looking at a levy within three years. Instead of supporting the good work that your public school is doing, you are crippling us. We are offering so many children opportunities. We are offering kids a chance at independence and a decent life. To get out of generational cycles of poverty. To be a robust, trainer workforce. And these antiquated systems and measures are stuck in this narrative that we are failing. Our children aren't failing. aren't failing. Our public schools are not failing. Poverty is the most significant factor in the results that you see. And it means we need more support resources. Not less. Don't fail our children. Over 1 million children attend public schools in the state of Ohio. One million children that are your responsibility and our responsibility. Partner with us to support these children through public school education. Partner with your communities that you represent. Let's improve these systems together. Let's remove these hurdles one by one until we see the outcomes we desire. Support SB 89 as the house approved it. Let's work together to resolve the issues of our communities together. If you move forward with legislation that penalizes our children basically for being poor, our district along with hundreds of other school districts across the state will have to go to our communities for levies. We won't have any other choice. And we will tell them why we need a levy when we were fine last year and we will tell them how our state representatives who are a part of our communities changed everything. #MiddieRising