

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. I am Mollie Lynch and I am a proud graduate of Jackson Local Schools in Stark County, a proud parent of two daughter that are flourishing in the Westerville City Schools, a passionate believer in the importance of a strong and well-funded public education system, and a community activist for Westerville City Schools.

Today I will address five topics in relation to EdChoice Expansion: data, assumptions, accountability, choice, and integrity.

Data: Good decisions start with good data. The Ohio Legislature used State Report Card data as a basis for EdChoice expansion. However, the data is bad. The State Report Card system is widely regarded as flawed. In fact, it is under review by this very body. The flawed report card system has drastically increased the number of schools labeled as "failing" under EdChoice expansion guidelines, including schools in some of Ohio's most highly regarded districts. The report card is the single tool used to determine a school's fate under the expansion program. One might say that HB9's authors regard the report card as "the whole picture" of what is happening in a school. However, the Ohio Department of Education disagrees. I find it ironic that the following statement is on the ODE's school report card landing page: "Report Cards are only one part of the story. To get a fuller picture, we encourage you to visit schools, talk to educators, parents and students, and review the school's or district's webpage. A lot of great things are happening every day in Ohio's schools!" So which is it? Are report cards the whole story, or only one part of the story? I agree with the Department of Education – there's so much more to the story than the flawed report card.

Assumptions: The authors of the EdChoice expansion program make the considerable assumption that the private or parochial school potentially chosen by parents under the EdChoice program is performing better than the alleged failing public school. But, how do we know? What measures of success does the Department of Education review before redirecting public funds to a private institution via the voucher program? What standards will the DOE use to measure the academic effectiveness of private and parochial schools? To what standards do private and parochial schools hold their teachers, who are not required to demonstrate competency and continuous education via licensure? We do not have report card data for these schools, yet EdChoice expansion's authors find it sufficient to assume that these schools are performing better simply because they are not part of the public school system.

The authors make a second, and perhaps even more tragic, assumption. EdChoice expansion assumes that by simply transferring a student to a private or parochial school, the student's performance will improve. Unfortunately, in today's society, children are faced with many challenges that adversely affect academic outcomes. I'm certain that you are familiar with the copious amounts of literature on this subject. The school of attendance is only one factor in student success. Students

who struggle with food and housing insecurity, who have to take responsibility for the care of younger siblings, who don't have enough money for shoes or school supplies, who have suffered trauma, who may be victims of abuse, who suffer from depression and anxiety, or who have disengaged parents need much more than a different school. Those students need to have the root cause of their academic struggles addressed. Transferring a student to a private or parochial school does not address any of these underlying issues and is, at best, a band-aid.

I have spent the majority of my career working for publicly traded companies. I can assure you that if I were to divert my budgetary dollars based on an assumption, did not understand the root causes of an issue, and did not have good data to defend my decision, I would not be employed for very long.

Accountability: In this state, we require public schools to be accountable for their performance and their use of public funds. Districts administer state mandated tests, must submit balanced budgets to the Department of Education, and are regularly audited. I can make a public records request if I want to know an employee's salary, a district policy or any number of other things. Voters elect representatives to provide oversight and ensure that the school system is effectively managed. In other words, there are numerous mechanisms in place to hold public school districts accountable for the use of public tax dollars. But, how do I know that private and parochial schools are effectively using and managing the public funds they stand to receive as part of EdChoice expansion? Private and parochial schools are not required to share their student achievement data, budgets, or audit results. I cannot make a records request if I want to better understand how public funds are being spent in these schools. Simply put, if legislators decide to divert public funds to private and parochial schools, then the legislators need to require that these schools be held to the same academic and fiscal standards as public schools.

Choice: I understand school choice. I understand that there are school districts that are truly failing their students. I understand that there are families living in poverty who do not have the financial means to make a different choice for their children's education. I believe that Senate Bill 89 is a mechanism to help families who would otherwise not have a choice. Senate Bill 89 bases vouchers on financial need and not on a flawed report card.

I also understand that many parents make a choice to send their children to private or parochial schools for any number of reasons before they ever enroll in a public school system. Westerville has never accounted for these students in enrollment or budgetary projections because they have never attended the school district. Westerville has also never received state funding for these students nor factored their educational expenses into operating levy requests.

Under EdChoice expansion, a student who has never attended an alleged "failing" school is eligible for an EdChoice voucher. Allow me to illustrate the issue this plan creates. There are approximately 15,300 students enrolled in Westerville City

Schools. Westerville plans and budgets to educate 15,300 students and receives funding based on enrollment of 15,300 students. For purposes of illustration, let's assume 300 students obtain an EdChoice voucher under the expansion program. During the next school year, Westerville will only have to educate 15,000 students in its buildings. However, another 700 students who have always attended a private or parochial school also obtain EdChoice vouchers. Under the terms of EdChoice expansion, Westerville loses funding for 1000 students, but actual enrollment only decreases by 300 students. I struggle to find the logic in that equation.

As a taxpayer, I am enraged that my tax dollars would be used to pay for the education of a student who never attended a public school. Tax dollars that are designated for the 15,300 students that currently attend Westerville City Schools. When I vote for school levies, I make a choice to direct my tax dollars to the public school system in my community. Yet, the state wants to invalidate my choice by diverting funds elsewhere.

Integrity: At the beginning of my testimony, I identified myself as a community activist for Westerville City Schools. I am proud that I have co-chaired two successful levy campaigns in Westerville (2016, 2019). During those campaigns, I spoke to countless parents and community members about the use of levy funds. In 2016, I asked voters to maintain funding by making an emergency levy permanent. I told voters that I wanted to "Keep a Good Thing Going" in Westerville City Schools. In 2019, I talked about the 3 S's: Safety for kids, Spaces for kids, and Success for kids in Westerville City Schools. I told the community that if they voted for those levies there would be no reductions or cuts. Our voters approved giving a portion of their hard earned dollars to support the public schools in Westerville, not to divert those funds to private and parochial schools.

I personally promised my community that our dollars would be used for our public schools, schools that are a source of pride in Westerville. Perhaps my personal integrity isn't of concern to you, but it matters to me. I have willingly dedicated countless hours to ensure our students have the best education possible and the resources required to deliver that education. The dollars that Westerville Schools stands to lose if the EdChoice expansion program is implemented with no changes will result in reductions in our district and districts across the state. Reducing resources is not a recipe for improving academic success. I promised my community that passing the most recent levy and bond issues would ensure that there would be no cuts, that we could maintain class size and programming and build 2 new buildings in our growing district. If EdChoice expansion stands, you will have made me out to be a liar. The Ohio legislatures' decision to divert public funds to private and parochial schools, schools that are not held to account for student achievement or financial management makes me a liar. A liar. I find that absolutely unacceptable.

Please know that I am not the only community member to have campaigned for school levies. We activists exist in every community across Ohio. I am not the only

activist to have promised that a community's tax dollars would be used to fund its public schools. We activists understand the flaws in the State Report Card and the damage that will be done if the State Report Card is used as a basis for EdChoice vouchers. Just remember, those of us who are activists are also voters. And without a doubt, you will all have to answer to the voters of Ohio.

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