



# Ohio Association of Public School Employees

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO

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## Testimony on EdChoice Vouchers

### HB9 Conference Committee

**Wednesday, February 19, 2020**

I am Randy Weston, Political Action and Legislative Affairs Director for the Ohio Association of Public School Employees (OAPSE) and I'm here today to give interested party testimony on HB 9. OAPSE represents 34,000 members state wide who work in our public schools, DD centers, head-starts and public libraries.

I begin by expressing my appreciation to the Committee and to the House and Senate for their leadership in tackling this important issue. The Educational Choice Scholarship Program and explosion in the number of so-called "failing schools" has generated an overwhelming response by our members to demand changes to the flawed EdChoice program. Our organization supports legislation that would put an end to Ohio's laws that force public school districts and their taxpayers to pay for private school tuition. Senate Bill 89 would do just that, by implementing an income-only based model for the EdChoice program. The problem will only get worse if the legislature fails to act. Next school year, more than 1,200 buildings in over 400 districts will have buildings that are labeled "failing" and will be eligible for vouchers based on flawed report cards. Common sense tells us that Ohio does not have over 1,200 'failing' school buildings. The situation is especially troubling given that some of the 'failing schools' on the eligibility list have overall grades of A, B or C. Allowing this program to continue as-is sends a false message of failure to the residents of these school districts and those looking to locate in our great state. In fact, Ohio's public school system is not failing. On the contrary – our public school districts and the students they educate are constantly improving.

The practical question facing us is what plan do we believe represents the best path for moving forward? OAPSE supports SB 89 as passed by the House, as it would move away from voucher eligibility based on flawed report cards and towards a program that funds vouchers directly by the state rather than deducting aid from public schools. Many districts are suddenly losing millions of dollars to the voucher program because of recent changes in law. High school students who were already attending a private school and paying their own tuition now have their tuition subsidized by the local school district at an annual rate of \$6,000 per student. The loss of these funds impacts the students who remain in public schools, because it forces district officials to make cuts that reduce services and opportunities for their students.

Senate Bill 89 as passed by the House would rename the existing income-based EdChoice program as the “Buckeye Opportunity Scholarship” and set the income threshold at 250% of the federal poverty. Applicants would be rank-ordered based on income, so lower income families would get priority in cases where appropriations aren’t sufficient to fund all qualifying applicants. This would be the main voucher program moving forward.

Our adamant opinion is to have the state move away from policies that promote criticism of Ohio’s public schools, particularly as they relate to a failed report card system that punishes schools and wrongly declares them to be “failing schools”.

We believe a much better investment of funds would be to find ways to eliminate educational disparities among public schools. But if the state wishes to go beyond funding a public system and offer private-school tuition to students, then the state should pay for them directly. School districts should not be required to subsidize these payments.

OAPSE also supports the other provisions of the SB 89 – most importantly the provision that would dissolve academic distress commissions and restore local control to Lorain, Youngstown and East Cleveland. Additionally, the bill would establish a student committee to look at the related education issues such as state testing and report cards; perform cost studies related to school funding; and sunset a provision related to school district territory transfers.

Thank you for all your time, work and effort in trying to find a solution to a very difficult and important issue for the students of Ohio.