

**EdChoice Testimony**

*Wednesday, February 19, 2020*

Good Evening Members of the Conference Committee,

My name is Steve Bain, and I am the Treasurer of the Oak Hills Local School District. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today on behalf of the Oak Hills Local School District in Hamilton County.

The Oak Hills Local School District is the 27<sup>th</sup> largest district in the State, serving 7,653 students. Our District is 28 square miles and is approximately 15 minutes west of downtown Cincinnati. The Oak Hills Local School District consists of 9 school buildings (1 High School, 3 Middle Schools, & 5 Elementary Schools). Of the 7,653 students, 5,432 of these students are in grades K-8.

Along with our district's 9 school buildings, our district has 5 K-8 private schools, which our district refers to as our parochial partners. The enrollment of our 5 parochial partners is 2,131 students, meaning nearly 30% of students attend a private school in our community.

Our district's philosophy has and will continue to remain: Strong Schools = Strong Communities.

Witnessing newer residential developments being wedged into small parcels of our landlocked district is the "proof in the pudding" that our District continues to be viewed as a destination district.

Our district's 45,000 constituents (which represent 90% of our tax base), emulate the blue collar, roll up your sleeves mentality, and we have continued to stretch our resources.

- Our resume reads:
  - o Out of 23 districts in Hamilton County, Oak Hills has the 3<sup>rd</sup> lowest tax rate
  - o 72% of spending directed to the classroom, the State average is 68%
  - o Highest level of achievement (B), while spending the lowest in the County
  - o A comparable district to Oak Hills spends \$1.00 for every \$0.68 cents our District spends
  - o 1 operating levy in 16 years (1997-2013)
  - o Multiple Blue Ribbon schools within our district

In essence, Oak Hills has lived a version of the EdChoice program for 7 years, since the inception of the Jon Peterson Scholarship. The Jon Peterson Scholarship, which only affects a small percentage of the overall 600 plus districts across our State fundamentally operates similar to the EdChoice program. Last year alone, our district had \$1.5 million diverted from our district to non-public schools; this is equivalent to a 1.5 mill levy per year for our community.

What started as “not the intent” legislation with the Jon Peterson Scholarship has become unsustainable. What started as a seed (\$192k in deductions of funding in 2013), has blossomed to over \$1.5m in just 7 years, all while our net State funding has averaged less than a 1% increase annually over the last decade. The deduction continues to soar, and because this scholarship affects very few, our district feels this legislation hasn’t gotten the attention anywhere near this year’s version of EdChoice, even though the adverse effects are similar. Between 2014-2018 nearly all 23 districts in Hamilton County sent requests, which could have been invoices, to the State since the total deduction was approximately \$29m.

The proposed EdChoice scholarship sounds similar to the “not the intent” legislation of the Jon Peterson Scholarship, by diverting public funds to non-public entities. Other than the major effects of the Peterson Scholarship (which have little to no criteria, such as income or achievement), our District has never been subject to the EdChoice vouchers. Our district has no community schools in our boundaries, which is again further evidence of our high return on our community’s investment.

Our District takes pride in being highly transparent with our fiscal health through monthly reports, as well as an updated list of initiatives on our website. As one of the single most important tools for our District’s decision, it is imperative that our financial forecast is accurate (our forecast has consistently been within 1.5% of original projections). A level of uncertainty, such as health care, or utilities, is always understood with any forecast, however, having all the unknowns with vouchers, dilutes the accuracy of a forecast and more importantly the trust of a community.

Our District has 1 school building currently eligible for the proposed EdChoice scholarship, however, the financial impact of this potentially planted seed that would blossom is eerily reminiscent of the Peterson Scholarship.

Our District is grateful for the individual conversations and group meetings with our local legislators, Representative Seitz and Senator Blessing in regards to EdChoice. Our district would appreciate your support of Senate Bill 89 with State funded vouchers, and continued exploration of State funded vouchers for all programs moving forward.

Regards.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Steven R. Bain". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large "S" and "B".

Steven R. Bain