

I am here today as a mother of three Westerville City School graduates and a voting member of the Westerville City School community. I hope my story changes your view of the EdChoice voucher program and our educational system in general.

Most people who know me would describe me as a dedicated parent volunteer that has supported Westerville City Schools over the last 23 years. I continue to remain engaged through community events, activities and as a community volunteer in my daughter's classroom at Westerville's Early Learning Center. Only those closest to me would know this dedication and level of engagement started out as a defense mechanism and grew into love for my community and my schools.

I grew up in a small farming community about an hour south of Westerville. I moved to Westerville when I married my husband, a longtime resident. His family has been part of the community and Westerville City Schools for over 100 years. His grandmother was the oldest living alumni until her recent passing at the age of 104. My adjustment to Westerville and its "small town feel" was much easier than my adjustment to the Westerville City School system.

Our school career started at Hawthorne elementary. At that time the student enrollment was over 800. That was twice the size of my high school. There was a large group of students that spoke little to no English. Teachers were asked to educate classrooms of students that range in academic abilities of gifted to those who did not have the skills to pass their current grade level. I quickly told my husband that if I was going to survive as a parent of three students in Westerville City Schools I needed to volunteer in the building, engage with the teachers, staff and administrators and join the PTA. He graciously supported my request and I became a stay-at-home mom that spent as much time in the school as possible.

My children would soon leave Hawthorne to attend the Magnet Schools in Westerville. My husband would have preferred they stay in their neighborhood school, but he once again supported my wishes to move the kids to a smaller school. Ultimately this was no reflection on the staff at Hawthorne who was dedicated to each student. It was simply a defense mechanism for me. It felt more like "home" for my children to be in a school of 125 students rather than a school of 800.

What I quickly learned was even though the school was smaller, the enrollment in a Magnet School would bring challenges in transportation. Social challenges with a family that had an autistic child and a child with disabilities related to drug addiction at birth. Socio-Economic challenges with families that did not have money for food or housing. So, in survival mode, I dug in even deeper and became a parent volunteer at the district level with Westerville Parent Council. I was hoping to find some magical solutions to address these challenges. What I found instead was far more valuable. I met amazing mentors who took me under their wing. They helped me understand the complexity of state mandates and interpret the real results of the state report card. But most importantly they helped me find my voice and direct my fear into advocacy for the students of Westerville City Schools.

My kids continued their careers through Genoa Middle School, Westerville Central High School and Westerville North High School. While it was harder to stay engaged as a parent volunteer in the classroom at this level, I did my best to be present in the building as much as possible. I watched as my kids matured quickly during their time at these schools. However, it was not because of their age. They were labeled as an "outcast" because they did not hang out with the popular kids. They chose their academics, sports and music over the weekend "party scene". One of my children was even bullied to

the extent we transferred her to another school within the district, separating her from her sibling. Once of the toughest choices we had to make as a family.

I am sure you are asking yourself, why would I continue to support public school education? Why did I not choose to move my children to a private school? I can tell you why. I don't believe that walking away fixes the issue. Parents must stay engaged to fix the system. The list of positive experiences is too long to list and far outweighed the negative experiences. I can say with confidence that if I had to do it all over again, I would not change one thing. Every challenge and ever experience, both positive and negative, taught my children compassion, respect, dedication, discipline, and advocacy. Their education went well beyond academics and helped shape the young adults they are today; a data analyst (former high school math teacher), a nurse and a special needs pre-school teacher.

So, I am once again engaging in this discussion and using my voice. I am not going to provide statistics on how many students will be impacted by this legislation and how many millions of dollars will be reallocated to private schools. I am writing today to ask you some tough questions:

- When was the last time you spent quality time in the schools in your time district? When was the last time you evaluated a school based on the time you spent walking their halls rather than reading their financials and their report card?
- When was the last time you had a conversation with a teacher, an administrator, a student or a parent about their educational concerns?
- How will the EdChoice voucher program address the needs of those students with a language barrier? Those students where English is not their primary language.
- How will the EdChoice voucher program address the poverty in schools? The poverty that prevents kids from learning and performing to their full potential.
- How will the EdChoice program address the Opioid epidemic that is impacting so many families? Creating situations where grandparents are now primary caregivers or high school age students are homeless and raising themselves.
- How will the EdChoice voucher program monitor private schools to ensure they are providing a quality education and appropriate services to all students?

I agree we have some large issues to address in our educational system but the EdChoice voucher program is not the answer. Redirecting tax dollars to private schools with no supervision of their performance is not the answer. We as community members and leaders need to really dig in and address the challenges the schools are facing today. This work will not be easy, but don't we owe it to our students? These are our future doctors, nurses, teachers, financial professionals... politicians. They deserve an educational system that supports them and empowers their teachers, staff, aides, administrators, custodians, therapists, bus drivers, etc. Once again, I ask the tough question, are you willing to be present and engage in a real conversation to address the real issues facing our education system today? Are you, as our state leaders, willing to put in the hard work and build an education system that our children so desperately need and deserve?

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Tammy Bennett

Westerville City School Parent and Community Member