

House Bill 9 Testimony-Interested Party

February 19, 2020

5 p.m.

Good evening Chairman Jones, and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee. I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the EdChoice Voucher program.

My name is Tom Perkins and I am the proud superintendent of the Northern Local School District, located in Perry County. I am also here as a representative and voice for the 138 school districts of the Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools. My goal for being here today is to share our concerns regarding the impact of the recent Edchoice voucher expansion, as well as the proposed amendments to HB 9.

Northern Local serves a rural community with one high school that carries a 96 % graduation rate, offers 19 different College Credit Plus courses, 2 different types of Associate degrees in Health Care Pathways and Business, Career Based Experiences for our special needs students in partnership with local businesses, and 86% of our middle school and high school students participate in one or more extra-curricular activities. Our middle school has earned an A or B the last two years in value added, teaches coding at the 8th grade level, and has earned an A on the report card for their AMO. We have elementary schools that have been named Schools of Promise, one that has met all of the report card indicators, and another that has regularly excelled at closing the gap. Collectively all three of our elementaries have had every single third grader meet the Third Grade Reading Guarantee each year.

Last year, nearly every sport and music program made it to the regional or state level of competition, with two final- four teams in boys and girl's basketball, and a state runner-up gymnastics team. There were 48 National Honors Society inductees and 16 graduates that entered the military. Yet, according to the State report card, they appear on the list of "failing" schools and those same students qualify for an Edvoucher according to recent voucher expansion and ODE interpretations.

As you are likely aware Northern Local Schools is the namesake for the DeRolph school funding litigation. It's been over two decades since a ruling was issued that the state was not meeting its obligation to adequately and equitably fund public schools. I am certain everyone is tired of hearing the DeRolph name brought up still today. SO ARE WE! Although many of the poorer districts in the state have seen improved buildings due to tobacco settlements; and some have even seen an increase in local tax revenue, the state remains indifferent to its obligations to adequately fund public schools. Today, two-thirds of the 611 public school districts are not on the current "funding formula" as a

result of the lack of funding provided, yet this legislation has frozen funding to public schools and increased deductions for charters. Now, to further exasperate funding shortfalls, this legislation wants to divert public funds to support private schools, specifically religious ones, in the name of providing parents and students with a better “choice.”

If such options are to be a true “choice,” wouldn’t it be appropriate that parents have all of the information in regard to defining “better?” There are no report cards for which to compare our parochial schools to public schools, but there are common end of course exams. The results definitively lean in favor of public schools. In fact, on most tests, when public school student scores are compared to those of parochial school students; the public school students outperform their parochial peers by an average of 25 points on both math and Language Arts. This is not to say that parochial students do not receive a quality education, but suggests that the facts do not add up to them automatically being considered a “better choice” than public schools as indicated in HB9. In fact, according to ODEs guidance regarding Edchoice, a student that attends a community school that is rated in Academic Emergency or Academic Watch, is not eligible for the EdChoice scholarship. However, if that same student resides in a public school district, that is determined by all measures to be superior, but doesn’t meet the K-3 literacy or some other single measure; they become eligible for the voucher program, at the expense of their public school’s local dollars. Additional ODE guidance states that a student must apply to the parochial/private school AND be accepted prior to applying for the scholarship, thus permitting the school to decide which students they are willing to accept. According to the guidance, this likely does not include special education students. I am still trying to find the definition of better choice in this guidance.

Senator Huffman, the primary advocate of performance based vouchers stated in 2011, that, “If you really think it through designating an entire school building as failing because the average of all the kids go below a certain amount really doesn’t make a lot of sense.” He also stated in 2011 and 2017 that, “It ought to be based on the need and ability to pay, not some arbitrary standard,” in presentations he made while advocating for income based vouchers. He was correct on both accounts. That brings us to the real reason we are here discussing the concept of public funds being transferred to private schools. It is not truly about performance or about the “better” choice; it never has been. It just became the vehicle for which to tie the Edchoice voucher cart to. It is about an attempt to save a parochial school system that has seen a rapid enrollment decline of nearly 50% since the 1980s. I think it is ironic that we are talking about the appropriateness of parochial schools, and yet we have a report card system that bears false witness. I personally believe that our parochial schools are important to our

communities and I attended one during part of my educational career and had a great experience. But my parents didn't send me there because they thought it provided a better education. They sent me there because it provided a religious one.

Northern Local has always had an outstanding partnership with our local parochial school and over 95% of their students' transition into our district in junior high and high school. This isn't about not wanting them to succeed, this is about protecting the 2,400 students that attend the public school that our taxpayers support. It is for this reason that we support the House version of SB89 and the elimination of performance based vouchers, and the deduction of public school funds from districts. Although I can not support any publically funded voucher going to private schools that have no accountability measures, the SB89 amendments at least make it a state burden and not a local one.

In conclusion, I want to remind the committee that our obligations as citizens and elected legislators, is to do the will of the people. In this case, *the people* are over 90% of students and families that attend our public schools. The concept of robbing Peter to pay Paul only shifts the debt from one to the other, but that debt still remains and may have long term consequences to both entities. Private schools that would receive large amounts of public funds, should surely be subjected to more governmental oversight and have less autonomy. Public schools that lose local funding will see reduced opportunities for large populations of students. This scenario isn't productive to either population, and should be avoided. It is my hope that this committee can work collaboratively with all involved to develop an appropriate option that doesn't place the public schools in adversarial position to the private schools. Chairman Jones, committee members I want to thank you for taking the time to allow me to address you this evening. I am happy to answer any questions that you might have at this time.