

HB9 Conference Committee – Valerie Cumming

Chairperson Jones and members of the HB9 Conference Committee,

Thank you for allowing me the time to speak before you today. My name is Valerie Cumming. I am the Vice Mayor of the City of Westerville, Ohio. But more importantly, I am the mother of four amazing daughters, all of whom attend Westerville City Schools.

Eighteen years ago, my husband Mark and I were recent graduates of The Ohio State University. We were newly married, and we knew that we wanted to start a family. We began looking for a place to live. To be honest, at 23 years old, I wasn't sure about the idea of moving to the suburbs. But ultimately, we chose to settle in Westerville. We liked the fact that it was pretty and well maintained. We liked the quaint Uptown district and the outstanding parks and bike trails. But that's not why we chose Westerville. We chose it for one reason only: we knew we wanted our future children to attend Westerville City Schools.

Today, our lives look quite different than they did back then. Our oldest is now 16 and a sophomore at Westerville South High School. Our 14-year-old attends Walnut Springs Middle School, and our two younger girls attend Mark Twain Elementary. Our experience with Westerville City Schools has been second to none. From the first day our girls entered their kindergarten classrooms, we have known that they would be loved and cared for as well as if we were doing it ourselves. Moreover, they would be exposed to the kind of diversity and broad range of experiences that I was worried they would miss out on by living in the suburbs. Our daughters have learned far more than math and spelling: our fourth grader recently told us about the holidays that a classmate from Nepal celebrates, while our high schooler debated the constitutionality of racial quotas in college admissions with us at the dinner table. There is no greater gift that we can give to our children than the gift of a well-rounded and exemplary education, and Westerville City Schools has done just that.

Yet according to the EdChoice designation, the elementary school that my daughters attend is considered "failing." And without a change to the EdChoice program, Westerville City Schools stand to lose millions of dollars in funding. That is money that will be taken from our children's educational needs and funneled directly to private schools.

As I said before, I am first and foremost a parent. But I am also a local elected representative, tasked with doing what is best for my city. As Vice Mayor and a City Councilmember, I am proud of Westerville. Not only did we come together across party lines to host the Democratic debates last fall, but recently, for the second year in a row, we were named a Top 7 Intelligent Community in the world by the Intelligent Community Forum – one of only three cities in the United States to receive this honor. But as an elected representative, I know something else to be fundamentally true: that our community is built on the strength of our public schools. Westerville voters agree. In November, we approved a combined 5.9 mill operating levy and a 1.95 mill bond issue. This is taxpayer money, meant to renovate old buildings, add new ones to accommodate our growing population, and improve safety and security. But the EdChoice program would take a chunk of these publicly-voted dollars away from our public schools, and instead channel them to private institutions.

Our public schools are the backbone of our community, upon which everything else depends. If our schools succeed, then we as a community succeed. If they fail, then no amount of pretty parks or prestigious awards will keep our city from following behind them. And simply put, the EdChoice program sets our schools up for failure. It cripples our schools and teachers by taking away the critical resources that they need to successfully raise up tomorrow's generation of leaders.

Eighteen years ago, my husband and I came to Westerville for the schools. Through job losses and financial hardship, we made sacrifices so that we could stay in Westerville for the schools. We felt – and continue to feel – that there is no better way to do right by our daughters than by giving them the best education possible. Today, I would ask that you do right by the children of Ohio, and allow our tax dollars to stay where they were intended: with the institutions and teachers of our public schools.

Thank you again for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.