

Chairman Jones, and members of the House Bill 9 conference committee, thank you for your attention today, as I share with you regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program. I am Amy Kissinger, an elected member of the Cambridge City School District Board of Education. I serve on the Southeast Region Executive Committee of the Ohio School Boards Association. Next week, I will take the oath of office as a member of the Board of Trustees of the Ohio School Boards Association. I am the Business Director for the Morgan County Board of Developmental Disabilities. Most importantly, I am the mom of two boys. One who recently graduated from our public school, and one who is in 3rd grade.

Today, I would like to address this issue from each of those three perspectives, beginning with my role as an elected school board member.

The Ohio Constitution is clear that it is our responsibility to fund a public common school system. I know that you have heard testimony to this regard already.

I remember the time well, when the DeRolph case was being litigated. We talked about kindergarten students in districts so poor, and with such inadequate facilities, that these young kindergarten children had to put on their coats to walk to another building to use the restroom in the winter. At the same time, you could travel a couple hours and be in a district with new facilities, state of the art curriculum and classrooms, low teacher to student ratios, and extracurricular opportunities for days... and of course, modern plumbing in every building.

For those of you who do not know much about the DeRolph case or why it was so important in the history of Ohio's public school system and its funding, I can explain it in one sentence.

The quality of a student's public education experience should not be a chance of geography.

It has been nearly a quarter century since Ohio's common school funding system of that time was declared unconstitutional. And yet, I am here today, to attempt to compel you to believe as I do --- that the quality of a student's public education experience should not be a chance of geography.

It would seem that this current legislature understands that this is a perilous time for our state's youngest and most vulnerable citizens, as evidenced by our most recent biennium budget and its increased attention on and funding for addressing the needs of children.

But then, how is it that we are having this conversation today, where I am begging you to not pillage our public schools' coffers and further inhibit our ability to provide for our students? Last July, it was prioritized in the state's budget to increase funding and specifically target lower-income children, with the goal of improving classroom performance. Today, I have to ask

you to please not approve a voucher system that steals directly from public school funding. To approve such a measure would be the epitome of speaking out of both sides of our mouth.

Like you, I am an elected official. Also like you, I expect accountability from our school district. What I expect from you is consistency and stability. We are in a system that purports to measure us via tools that change from year to year. We are in a system where funding changes – and sometimes drastically -- every 2 years at a minimum. The biennium budget before this last, our district received the fifth largest cut in the state of Ohio. We are not a large district. Our total student count is just under 2000. I understand that the cut was based upon enrollment changes over the years, but the cut was made all at once. Our treasurers prepare 5-year budget projections so we can make informed decisions about when, and if to attempt to pass a levy, or the alternative, how to make necessary cuts. Certainly, no one is prepared for the financial impact of a voucher system that explodes, and in an instant creates a state-wide financial crisis. Unless, of course, you count the private school industry that will undoubtedly blossom with a new stream of funding - public funding – with no guarantee that these private schools will educate our students any better than they are currently being educated. They will receive this funding without having to account to the tax payers who are providing it.

As a public employee who participates in audits for the purpose of ensuring that I am providing proper oversight for the use of public funds, and ensuring that they are being used for their lawful, public purpose, I am astounded by the notion that any individual has a right to our public resources for their private use.

Sometimes our municipal water department sends out a letter advising of a particular test that was not passed. Yet, it has never occurred to me to demand a rebate of my tax dollars in support of our collective water supply so I can purchase water from a private vendor.

The analogies are endless, but here we are, talking not about municipal water service, or public roadways, or law enforcement services, but we are talking about our children, and allowing them to become the cash cows of a private industry. How did we allow this happen? Why do we allow this to persist?

My youngest son is in 3rd grade. This topic has challenged me to really think about how this affects parents of children, and when they are trying to decide – should I send my child to a private school or continue to send him to a public school which yes, contains all of the problems found in our community? I have thought long and hard about this for my own children. And even though I have multiple opportunities in rural Southeast Ohio, including parochial – at my

personal expense – or open-enrollment opportunities at neighboring public schools, which would not be my personal expense, I decide to keep my child in the school that belongs to our community.

I want my child to grow up in the microcosm of our community which is our public school, so he will know how to relate to his peers, to be able to understand his world. And if I do a half decent job as his mom, maybe he'll want to serve in some capacity someday, and make a difference.

There is a type of student in many of our districts, and they represent a large portion of the student body. They are getting themselves up in the morning and getting on the bus independently. They come to a public school to not only receive their education, but to eat, to receive support from counselors and nurses, dental clinics, and even to do their laundry. Not only do they lack the parent support that students attending private education have, some of these children are carrying Narcan for the horrible chance that they might need to save their parents. By syphoning away public dollars to allow them to be used privately, we widen the gap even further, between the haves and the have nots. The children who are struggling in true poverty are the ones who likely do not have the support system to assist them in obtaining and navigating the voucher process.

If you believe that our children are our future, as most do, then there is one thing and only one thing to do, and that is to dig in. There are many of us committed to fight for our communities, in this battle against the opioid epidemic and the death and trauma that comes with this drug abuse crisis, and the battle against poverty and the hunger, homelessness and other trauma that comes with being poor.

Our public schools, which are true reflections of our communities, must not be abandoned out of fear when we look into that mirror and see that reflection. We must dig in, and not walk away. The problems in our schools are not fixed by walking away. They are fixed by community engagement, because that is where the root of these problems exist.

And while the parents of students who receive vouchers are threatening you that they will “pack up and move” if you don't continue to GIFT them public funds for their private use, you won't hear us making such threats. We, who have committed ourselves to public service – just like you have done and sworn an oath to do – will not tuck our tails and run, and give up on the overwhelming majority of Ohio's students in public education. We will still be there, longing to be part of the solution, continuing to offer our accountability, continuing to seek continuous improvement, because we know that Ohio's children need us.

And now, more than ever, they need you to honor your commitment to them, and properly fund public education in Ohio.