



OHIO CHRISTIAN EDUCATION NETWORK

A project of Citizens for Community Values

2/20/2020

Conference Committee

House Bill 9

Interested Party Testimony

Chairman Jones and members of the Conference Committee on House Bill 9, I am Averel Meden, Executive Director of the Ohio Christian Education Network (OCEN), a project of Citizens for Community Values. OCEN is a network of over 50 Protestant and Catholic schools, along with parents and students from across Ohio. We advocate on behalf of Christian schools, and parents' rights to choose the education and upbringing of their children. All OCEN schools are chartered with the state, comply with Ohio's operating standards, undergo health and safety inspections, and have properly certified teachers in the classroom. The majority of these schools are EdChoice providers and all comply with ODE audits.

Ohio Families Wait

Parents and schools across the state are waiting for answers. The delay in processing applications by ODE, has put parents and schools in limbo. Parents made decisions starting in November, and over Christmas break, and the delay only increases the agony and financial burden for parents, who have already begun the application and financial aid processes. For many, EdChoice is the last step of the process. Additionally, there is disruption to schools, through teacher contracts and in programming.

The last few years ODE has EdChoice announced awards well into the school year. This past year alone, ODE processed final determinations for EdChoice scholarships in November for the school year that began in August. Further delay in ODE starting the processing of applications, will only cause additional turmoil for parents at both private and public schools. Parents deserve to know what options will be available to them.

Dozens of parents and schools have come to the statehouse, taken off of work, put their daily lives on hold, to testify in this committee saying getting rid of, or making substantial changes to, the EdChoice program, midstream, will cause harm. Yet the benefits of this program for their child and their school are boundless. There is no question in their mind whether the EdChoice program is of value to Ohio families.

Many of the families we work with, have lived in the same neighborhood their whole life but the local school isn't a viable option for their child. Stories of physical violence on the playground and in school restrooms, content not appropriate for their family's morals and values, and inability to focus in a chaotic classroom setting all bubble up when parents talk



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about their experience prior to finding the right fit for their child in a chartered non-public school.

The EdChoice scholarship is a lifeline. In practicality it's a scholarship that the student's parents receive to pay towards the education of their student when they opt into a private school. But make no mistake, if you are a parent and there is a problem with your student or the education they are receiving, you need a lifeline. Changes to the program after the list has been published are adversely affecting Ohio families. There is no tangible way to determine the extent of damage to these families. However, we are certainly able to calculate the cost to the state.

There are approximately 30,000 students in EdChoice and around 12,000 students in the Expansion program. ODE has applied a 60,000 cap to the combined programs, leaving 18,000 scholarship awards available to students that choose to access one. If every one of the students is accessing a scholarship for high school, the cost would be \$108M (18,000 scholarships x \$6,000 max. award). This is approximately 0.46% of the \$23.5B total spending on k-12 education in Ohio each year. However, if these students were to attend the least expensive public school district in Ohio, taxpayers would spend \$129M, educating them.

EdChoice History

EdChoice was created in 2005 in HB 66¹, the Main Operating Budget of the 126th General Assembly. Since that time, the program has thrived through 7 state budgets, under 4 governors, republican and democratic, and the General Assembly that has seen both major parties in power.

Initially, EdChoice scholarships were awarded to students with maximum amounts of \$4,250 (k-8) and \$5,000 (9-12). The scholarship amount was tied to the base formula amount and was to increase by the same percentage as the increase in the base cost formula amount for school districts. However, the amount of the scholarship has not grown significantly over the 14 years of the program.

Also at the time EdChoice was created it was tied to schools with three years' worth of academic emergency. Over time, as public school accountability has changed, the criteria for EdChoice also changed to align with Ohio's accountability system. After the Ohio Report Cards were developed, EdChoice transitioned to tying performance on metrics on the Ohio Report Card to EdChoice designation.

HB 555² (2012) added the additional components from the fully phased-in Ohio Report card to the list of criteria for which low performance, 2 out of 3 years on individual metrics would qualify a school as an EdChoice designated school.

¹<https://www.lsc.ohio.gov/documents/budget/126/mainoperating/greenbook/EDU.PDF>

²http://archives.legislature.state.oh.us/bills.cfm?ID=129_HB_555



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Then, in House Bill 487³ (2014), the legislature added in low performance on the graduation rate component of the Ohio Report Card, which has driven most of the current public angst against the Report Card. This change allowed private high school students to access EdChoice, but was not implemented until 2019, because of the “safe harbor” years and also due to the Ohio report card using the prior year’s data for purposes of EdChoice. For example, the computation of the 2019-2020 EdChoice list we use overall grade data from 2018-2019 school year.

Contrary to current belief, HB 166, state budget passed in July 2019, did not change eligibility for public schools to be designated EdChoice eligible. The only effect on the EdChoice program was adding clarifying language on existing private school high school students to access EdChoice if their assigned high school was on the EdChoice list. This change did not add any new schools on the list.

House Bill 9 & Senate Bill 89

Families with a 10th grader, 2nd grader, kindergartener, who have made ends meet and have never before been eligible for EdChoice. These are real Ohioans, taxpayers, with real jobs and real family budgets to balance. Ohio made a commitment to these families and the day before their applications were to be turned in, Ohio said “not so fast”.

Each of the proposals passed by either the House or Senate have contained two common themes: 1.) reduce the EdChoice schools list and 2.) increase the threshold for entry into the EdChoice Expansion program.

As currently written, neither of the plans adequately protect the families that the state made a promise to back in November. Reducing the list of families eligible because of their schools’ EdChoice designation and modestly increasing the income threshold for applications will not cover all families affected. There is already a cap in the number of available scholarships, there is not a need to tighten the income threshold but set a priority in statute for low income families.

This debate has incorrectly, turned into the merits of public schools versus private schools. This is not a debate between the two but about a promise made to parents in November and a relatively simple question, on how you fund those students. If not through the deduct, which has cause much tension over the years, then direct funding may provide a way to keep the commitment to Ohio families and remove much of the crossfire that has ensued.

I urge you to consider what these families are going through and quickly ensure that they have access to the EdChoice scholarship they were promised in November of last year. We should aim to include families, not exclude them, as HB 9 and SB 89 both do by limiting the existing published list for the 2020-2021 school year.

³http://archives.legislature.state.oh.us/BillText130/130_HB_487_EN_N.html