



Fairfield Union Local School District

Board of Education Office
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Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding House Bill 9, and specifically, Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program. I am Chad Belville, Superintendent of the Fairfield Union Local School District. Let me begin by giving a sincere thank you on behalf of all parents, educators, and citizens for the commitment this committee has given to hear testimony on this important topic. I can appreciate the difficulty of your position trying to find a balance between the needs of parents, public schools and private schools. Your dedication to finding a solution for the benefit of all children is to be commended.

I have watched and read the testimony of both proponents and opponents to House Bill 9 over the past week and a half, and it is evident this is a polarizing topic. It has also become clear to me this is not a matter of school choice. Be it open enrollment or applying to attend a private school, every parent in Ohio has the right to apply to attend any school in the state. There is certainly a debate to be had on whether all schools should be required to accept any student who applies to attend, but we do have school choice in Ohio. In all reality, the focus of these deliberations is about equality and funding for schools. Until we finally address these two aspects of education in Ohio, we will never be able to move forward as a state.

I believe we all acknowledge the accountability system in Ohio is flawed at best. While I do not want my testimony to delve into the disfunction of the state report card, I do question why this body will not include some sort of accountability system for schools that accept EdChoice vouchers. If tax dollars are going to be used by students to attend private schools, there must be answers to the following questions: Why would our state representatives not mandate private institutions follow the same accountability measures as public schools? Why are private schools not mandated to require the same credentials and licensure of staff as public schools? Why are private schools not required to accept all students who apply via an EdChoice voucher? Finally, if you are unwilling to place these mandates on private schools, why will you not remove these requirements for public schools?

As an educator, my primary concern with the EdChoice voucher system centers around the disparity of requirements and mandates between public and private schools. Ultimately, if the report card and the litany of tests public schools are required to give students are good for kids

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and good for education, the requirements should be applied equally for all students in Ohio. I wish we could spend the majority of our time debating the equality of requirements for public schools vs. private schools, but it would be naïve of me not to acknowledge the funding aspect of this issue.

Public school districts are faced with mounting societal pressures to be all things to all people. When a crisis or issue manifests in our state, our state representatives are quick to turn to public schools to be the source of a solution. From dating violence to chronic absenteeism to the opioid crisis, public schools are mandated to lead the charge to find answers to these problems. I, along with my colleagues, are proud to serve on this front line, and we will always answer the call to duty by our state. However, it is important to realize meeting these mandates takes time and money.

In addition to state mandates that take time away from instruction in content areas which are assessed on the state report card, a recent article in *Education Week* illustrated the fact many public schools have become the main source for mental health care for students. I can attest we are seeing a drastic increase in the number of students with severe mental and behavioral issues in our schools. Public schools and public-school teachers are now working to educate Kindergarten students who throw desks, hit, spit and shout obscenities. Public schools are struggling, and it is shameful we must fight this hard for funding.

Sydney and Morgan Belville have always been open enrolled to the school district where I work, so I am very much a school choice advocate. Fairfield Union receives state money for my daughters, so it would be hypocritical of me to expect students using EdChoice vouchers to receive no state funding. However, I believe this is the key point. I am talking about state funding not local tax dollars. Communities that pass local levies to support their public school district should have the right to expect every penny of the levy to be spent on students in their local public school.

The solution to this issue seems very clear to me. The EdChoice voucher system was established to give low socio-economic students an equal opportunity to attend the school of their choosing. I believe we need to fulfill the original intent of the program. The EdChoice voucher system should be a state-funded program that rewards vouchers based on the poverty level of the students. Also, until we reach a point where we have equality in regards to accountability for public and private schools, I do not believe there should be performance-based vouchers in Ohio.



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Eighteen years ago, I was in my second year of teaching, and I made the following comment to one of my mentors, "In my lifetime, public schools as we know them will not exist. Public schools will be for special education students and students from low income families." I did not know where all of the other students would go, but I am afraid we are continuously pushing public schools in this direction. I truly believe we are at a cross roads in education, and the decisions made today by this House will impact education for many years to come.

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide input regarding Ohio's EdChoice voucher program. I would be happy to answer your questions at this time.

Respectfully,

Chad Belville
Superintendent
Fairfield Union Local School District