

WITNESS INFORMATION FORM

Please complete the Witness Information Form before testifying:

Date: Thursday, February 20, 2020

Name: Rachel Jones, Kemp Boyd, Kurran Bishop

Are you representing: Yourself Organization

Organization (If Applicable): Chapel Hill Christian School

Position/Title: Parents/Board Members

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Do you wish to be added to the committee notice email distribution list? Yes No

Business before the committee

Legislation (Bill/Resolution Number): HB9

Specific Issue: Future of EdChoice

Are you testifying as a: Proponent Opponent Interested Party

Will you have a written statement, visual aids, or other material to distribute? Yes No

(If yes, please send an electronic version of the documents, if possible, to the Chair's office prior to committee. You may also submit hard copies to the Chair's staff prior to committee.)

How much time will your testimony require? 30 minutes

Please provide a brief statement on your position:

Because Christian Education is the collaboration of a students family, their church and the Christian School, School Choice is inherently a necessity. This necessity is made in controvertible due to some christian parents' desire to integrate faith into learning in every aspect of their child's education.

Please be advised that this form and any materials (written or otherwise) submitted or presented to this committee are records that may be requested by the public and may be published online.

Hello Chairman Jones and committee members,

Thank you for the time each of you have taken to hear and work through this very important issue. For several years, I have been advocating for families to find educational opportunities through the Ohio EdChoice scholarship. With the release of the new expanded EdChoice school list, I was excited to see that many more families and their children were given the freedom to choose the education they desired for their children.

Many parents are actively looking for the best option for their child's education. With the recent proposed changes in House Bill 9, I became alarmed with how these changes would penalize thousands of Ohio students. After watching several hours of the committee hearings, I could no longer sit on the sideline and not be a voice for these families. I have personally witnessed tremendous change and parents gain hope for the future of their children because of the EdChoice scholarship.

Today, I come representing several families from Akron, Ohio. For over 15 years, my husband and I faithfully volunteered at a Christian, nonprofit organization in the city of Akron. Weekly we would invest our time with high school students. We loved being involved with these students and giving them a place to belong and be themselves. As a couple, we felt strongly that in order to really understand where these students came from and to walk with them in life we needed to live in the city. For 10 years, we resided and actively participated in that community.

As we began our family, we recognized that the school environment in the Akron Public Schools was something we did not want to expose our children to. We have experienced the Akron Public Schools. As a resident, it was not uncommon for us to see several police cars at the high school for a serious threat or violent fight. We would attend high school football or basketball games and almost yearly a game would end with police involvement. During school hours, I would see students roaming the streets surrounding the school. In addition, the students we interacted with often needed assistance with schoolwork, and we recognized their inability to read or write. The academic education was not meeting standards. We cannot ignore the fact that Akron Public Schools has serious disciplinary issues. In addition to weak academics, many families do not agree with political, sexual, environmental, or personal agendas presented in the classroom or through curriculum. Parents are paying tax dollars for something they do not want their children to experience.

When EdChoice went into effect, many families in our neighborhood were excited for a different option. On our street, nearly every kid went to a different school either through EdChoice or open enrollment to another neighboring community public school. Many parents utilized their freedom of open enrollment to neighboring public schools such as Coventry, Norton, and Barberton. Several families decided they were no longer going to tolerate the poor education coupled with the unsafe learning environment. On my youth softball team, girls began to attend different private schools that presented new academic challenges and created behavioral discipline in their lives. Akron Public Schools continued to decline and not meet the needs of these families.

EdChoice became a tool for students and families to have freedom. I have educated parents in my local community and assisted them in obtaining vouchers. I strongly believe parents should decide

what is best for their child's education. With the proposed House Bill 9, the income based model would eliminate scholarships for thousands of students across Ohio. These families do not make education plans from year to year. Families have completed tours, entrance exams, interviews, and acceptance letters have been mailed. The process for enrollment to a private school is similar to the application to a college or university. Many students have taken photos of acceptance letters and are excited to have a different learning environment. These students want to be free to learn in the best school fit for them. The families invest time and effort into the process while gaining a sense of empowerment. They have decided to become an integral part of a school community.

EdChoice has created competition among private schools to be the best they can be. We should not disrupt this system. Many of our private primary and secondary schools in Akron create this incredible community for students through excellent sports programs, international and local service opportunities, enjoyable school traditions, and several unique extracurricular activities. The learning extends beyond the classroom. Private schools create this community on a fraction of the budget and with the powerhouse support of parent volunteers. Public school systems have eliminated many of these opportunities due to the historical excuse that they lack funding. Recently, Akron public school administration invested 2 million dollars for renovations on a newer building for administration offices in downtown Akron. This allocation of funds reminds us that funding is a chronic problem with spending.

From my experience at our children's private schools, we have created a strong partnership between the school, our family and our church in training up our children. As parents, we have an active role in our children's education and our school welcomes parental insights and requests. For example, 3 years ago, I started learning that computer programming or coding would be the new language of the 21st century. I also began looking at other public and private schools around us and to see how they developed coding skills among elementary school students. I discovered a neighboring public school implemented robotics. Since we need to stay competitive and current as a private school, I discussed my concerns and findings with an open administration. Now, we have students actively participating in coding and robotic competitions. These robotic students continue to qualify in competitions nationally and internationally. These opportunities are exciting and unique for our students. Together, the school, church and parents work to provide a solid education and experience to students. Many parents want to be a part of their children's education. From my experience, this level of parent involvement is not welcome at all public schools. My children's private schools have created a partnership where each party needs to actively participate.

After residing in the city of Akron, I believe the state report card is true in the findings and recognition of failing schools. Most students cannot possibly succeed in a chaotic school environment, uncertain home life, lack of school structure, and lack of school discipline. Although there are teachers doing an exceptional job in the classroom, the multitude of disruptive variables in public schools negatively impact outcomes. Many public school officials have said the school report card is flawed. The expanded EdChoice list released in 2019 indicated Akron Public Schools to only have 2 schools that are performing at a satisfactory level. From my experience and interaction with the public schools and

their students, these failing report cards are accurate. If the state report card is flawed, why are so many families leaving the public school system?

Living in a city plighted with violence and crime can sometimes be difficult. However, as a family we enjoyed the years spent in Akron. We had a strong neighborhood and community base there. If EdChoice is changed to only income base, I am concerned that many families will leave Akron. EdChoice vouchers are an incentive to keep strong, working families in the city limits. However, if removed families will relocate to surrounding suburbs with better education and less violence. Families are not willing to risk their children's futures in the hands of Akron Public Schools.

EdChoice is working to create competition among the education systems. Competition makes us better. In some ways, it is exciting that we are here discussing this issue as we have the opportunity to expand the freedom to obtain better education to more families. Families get to investigate for themselves where they can get a high performing education. Competition between education of the public and private system pushes us to obtain better results. By eliminating or reducing EdChoice scholarships, parents and children are losing freedom. Every student should be free to learn, grow, and develop in the school that their parents decide best meets their individual needs.

I stand in agreement that education deserves a large amount of taxpayer dollars. Education is essential to the well-being of each individual. The United States needs a strong education system to remain competitive in the world. However, I cannot justify or begin to understand why I am paying for an education service that I do not utilize. EdChoice uses taxpayer dollars and allows families to have a choice of where they want to see their education dollars spent. We need to rethink what public education means.

Six months ago, we decided to relocate our family out of the city of Akron to be closer to our private schools. Since moving into a non-failing school district, we are not directly affected today by the proposed legislature. We will no longer be eligible for the EdChoice voucher. However, I could not neglect the families in the city who are wanting the best education possible for their children. They want to have the freedom to decide what school environment they want for their children.

School vouchers and privatization of education is not going away. Currently, 14 states have a traditional form of voucher. These states created models which should be examined and considered by committee. Many states have adopted a combination of voucher programs that address low income, failing schools or schools within city limits. In addition, I believe we should also consider the option of adding a state tax credit for families who pay for private school tuition. These voucher models could all be examined for the future years. This process of refining EdChoice will take months and likely years to accomplish fairly.

During the committee hearings, I have heard the question asked multiple times if the voucher system should be based on income. I believe Edchoice should be based on both criteria income and school performance. Income based model force families to crunch numbers in their budget, reducing overtime, quitting jobs, and finding ways to reduce income to meet the income based numbers. This reduction in productivity in the workplace to obtain a voucher is a reality.

Families are waiting. I have talked to several families who are not sure what they are doing next year. I am asking for EdChoice to be implemented as published to the public in 2019. It is very hard to understand why such a hasty changes must be made after parents were expecting our government to abide by established law.

Please consider taking more time on this issue.

Thank you for the opportunity to address your committee.

Rachel Jones

Dear Chairman Jones and Committee Members,

I want to thank each of you for the time that you are taking to hear, discuss and process all the requests that you have received these past few weeks.

Our family has been a participant in the EdChoice scholarship for the past 6 years. It has been very important as a family that we send our children to a school that walks in the same foundation spiritually; to have people outside our family speaking in and pouring into our children's lives means the world to us. To have our children come to a school each day that has a strong spiritual and foundational private school setting, allows our students to grow, mature and soar in the freedom of individuality, yet with the safety of boundaries.

As an academic perspective, I appreciate the challenge and exposure to different academic options which I was never exposed to growing up. Each child is challenged to not only excel, but challenged to be the best they can be each day, under a loving, kind and safe environment.

I appreciate the class structure; my child is being attended to in a classroom setting which is small, which allows them to have more intimacy, if you will, setting, where each child is known by their teacher, administrator and families. This also allows families to have a good understanding why they sent their child to this school, which makes for community.

I appreciate the disciplinary process, which is constructive, biblical, and we see real growth in maturity through this process. With the discipline here, our children feel safe, heard and taught to trust adults and obey in order that they may grow in maturity and become good citizens in society.

In this smaller private school setting, we have learned the word community - first hand. During a time of real challenge with our family, our School were the "first responders" for us, either by a trip to the hospital, trip to our church, a phone call or many cards from families, teachers and friends. Our School Community were the hands and feet that we needed during this hard time in our life.

In closing, our private school experience has been a gift that we do not take for granted and for which we are deeply thankful. We believe our family and children feel safe, loved and appreciated for their uniqueness and God-given talents by every staff member, teacher and administrator. We have been so thankful for this opportunity!

Kemp Boyd
CHCS Board Member
Executive Director of *Love Akron*

Dear Chairman Jones and Committee Members,

Our experience as recipients of the education choice scholarship has evolved over the last 7 years. We were a family with three children whose tuition was fully paid by the education choice scholarship and then we became a family that pays the gap between the scholarship and the full tuition. Now I am not only a parent of two students attending the school but also a school board member. If we didn't have the current education choice scholarship when our income went up very slightly we would have had to uproot our children from their school because we couldn't afford the tuition.

I personally attended public school through 8th grade and then attended a private school for high school on partial scholarship. By attending private school I was able to receive a higher standard of education which better prepared me for college. In college many of my peers who had done well in Ohio public school were forced to retake classes they should have already mastered in high school which therefore extended the time it took them to get a degree. We have also personally experienced the education disparity between schools as our oldest child has attended public school, then charter school, and now private school. At our neighborhood public school she was near the top of her class in K-2 grade. It wasn't until we transferred her to a charter school in 3rd grade that we realized she was behind what was required for the 3rd grade guarantee testing. The charter school helped get her to a level where she was able to pass the test and she was again near the top of her class upon completing 3rd grade. The following year we enrolled her into a private school, Chapel Hill Christian School (CHCS), and there she needed to repeat 3rd grade because she tested below the academic standard. This is one illustration of how large the academic gap was that we experienced between our neighborhood public school and CHCS. We can only assume that had she not changed schools and continued excelling in our neighborhood public school she would have not been prepared to succeed or excel in middle or high school.

The elementary, middle, and high schools in our neighborhood have been failing since our 14 year old daughter began kindergarten 9 years ago. When our neighborhood was redistricted after her kindergarten year we chose to open enroll her in our neighborhood elementary school that wasn't failing. Over the last 6 years or more the challenges of our neighborhood schools have compounded as our neighborhood contains many students who are learning English as a second language. Many of the parents don't speak English and are refugees from Nepal, Burma and other countries. In our neighborhood our children have also had the opportunity to grow up with many children from Mexico and from various African countries. We love our community and feel this is a great addition to the neighborhood culturally, however, the schools have not been equipped with the resources to adequately teach ESL students and communicate with their families while also providing a high standard of education to the traditional students. Furthermore some teachers at our neighborhood school struggle with closing the language/ cultural gap. I feel these factors as well as others contribute to the reasons our neighborhood schools are failing.

We also feel that the education choice scholarship is beneficial to these students whose parents don't speak fluent English. Our neighbors, a Mexican family, for instance were able to enroll their children in CHCS three years ago and the growth we have seen in the students and the parents has been substantial. Like us by attending CHCS they have gained access to a high quality education including community service, local and foreign missions, higher academic standards, smaller class sizes and other opportunities they wouldn't have had in our neighborhood public school. Their extended family members who are also Spanish speaking haven't taken advantage of this same opportunity and the contrast in academic achievement is evident. As parents we have also gained access to a larger network through our children attending a private school with families of various economic statuses. Through the Education Choice scholarship and this experience the school has also been enriched by the diversity of the families that attend. One example of this is CHCS partnering with a local church and providing bussing for inner city children and families in our area to attend sports camp at a state college venue in the summer.

Now that our 14 year old daughter is in middle school and entering high school there are only a couple public school options in our city that are not failing. There also are not many high school charter school options in our area. For years people in my neighborhood and others have driven their children 20-25 minutes across town to the one or two public high schools that aren't failing. Upon open enrolling our daughter in December was not accepted, as space is of course limited in both of those schools because no one wants to send their child to a failing school. Without the education choice scholarship it leaves my family and many parents like us without a viable option.

We also teach and uphold Christian values in our home. Allowing our students to have the opportunity to attend a school that teaches the same values has made a tremendous impact in our children's lives. It's important to us to make sure our children attend a school that has a high moral standard as it will help them develop positive character traits and enable them to become productive members of society.

As taxpaying citizens we all should have access to a high standard of education, and without the Education Choice scholarship the only means to attain that standard of education is higher economic status. This however is not an option for my family and most families in my neighborhood. The only alternatives are having our children attend a school that has been failing for many years, attempt to open enroll them in the few overcrowded schools across town and hope for the best, or send them to a charter school. In summary, school choice and the Education Scholarship is not only an asset to private schools, it is a vital part of leveling the playing field for families in many communities like ours.

Mr. Kurran Bishop
CHCS Board Member
Elder SPAN Ministries