

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding Ohio EdChoice Voucher program. I am Darren Jenkins, superintendent of the Bellaire Local School District in Belmont County. I have been a school superintendent in Ohio for 20 years. During this time, I have come to conclude the following: unintended consequences sometimes lead to poor public policy.

On Wednesday March 27, 2019, the Ohio Department of Education issued a list of schools whose students are eligible for an Ohio 'Ed Choice' scholarship. This program, established in 2005 by the Ohio General Assembly, allows students attending 'Ed Choice Schools' to attend private schools through this 'scholarship' by taking public funds (both local voted tax dollars and state basic aid dollars) and diverting those monies to the private school to be used for tuition. Bellaire High and Elementary Schools have been placed on this list for the first time this year. Of the eleven students who have applied for the EdChoice scholarship this year from Bellaire, nine have never set foot in any of our buildings. This is not the original purpose of the program.

My goal in this communication is to outline why we believe this designation is unfair; to highlight some exemplary programs in our buildings; and to advocate for the changes in the program, which have been made in the House of Representatives through SB89.

First, let's examine the years included to determine this designation and compare them to what was going on in the Bellaire Local School District at that time to see if those events may have had an impact on student achievement. The years included by the Ohio Department of Education are: 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2017/18. From December 2009 until May 2017, the Bellaire Local School District was in Fiscal Emergency and under the control of an appointed Fiscal Oversight Commission. During the period December 2009 through the 2012/13 school years, the Bellaire Schools downsized nearly \$5 million by cutting 39 teachers, five administrative positions and fifteen other classified positions. Then in 2013/14 another \$200,000 was cut from the budget through reductions in staff and services to students. We believe most people would agree this level of reduction in staff, programs and services in a district our size would have a negative effect on test scores. It certainly did! This district was in survival mode.

To make matters even worse, on the Bellaire Elementary Report Card for the 2013-14 academic year the recorded card listed a 'C' not the 'D' grade necessary for EdChoice designation. I asked the Ohio Department of Education for an explanation. The explanation is, and I am paraphrasing, that because K-3 literacy was first reported in 2013 and 2014. Moreover, because districts across the state had entered their data incorrectly, the ODE reopened the reporting window and re-averaged the scores statewide. That dropped Bellaire from a 'C' to a 'D' but the report cards were archived showing us having a 'C'. This makes no sense! It is like a teacher changing a student's grade after the school year and leaving the original higher grade on the official transcript.

The 2017/18 academic year was the first following release from state oversight. The community had just approved an emergency operating levy, its first in over 40 years. However, most importantly, this was the first year since 2009 the district had the ability to concentrate on its educational program for students, again. We began restoration of programs such as elementary Art and Music. Aside from the value of restoring these programs for their own sake and their direct benefit to our children, it allowed us to modify building schedules to permit teachers greater intervention time. It also permitted us to begin the process of aligning our curriculum more closely to the state standards and modifying

instruction accordingly. Still, our test scores on the state assessment were negatively affected by the district's financial history, staff and program cuts.

Now that the Bellaire District is in its second year of recovery and looking toward its future, what has changed? We have continued to align our curriculum both at each grade level and vertically preK-12 so that we operate as a system of schools, not three distinct buildings under the same district umbrella. We have expanded our professional development efforts to include alignment of assessments beyond that of simply aligning instructional practices, making certain we teach what the state tests measure and making certain we assess our students in ongoing formative ways that will lead to summative success on the state measures.

To date, the new and/or restored programs include:

- Music education k-8
- Art education k-8
- Physical education k-8
- STEM Academies in each building
- 21<sup>st</sup> Century Afterschool enrichment programs in each building
- An emphasis on a science, technology, engineering and math curriculum which promotes project based learning and other 21<sup>st</sup> century skills necessary for success after high school, regardless of what a student's plan may be. Innovation and adaptation are becoming strengths in the Bellaire Local Schools.
- We have student one-to-one computers and the program has now been fully implemented by the 2019/20 school year.
- A SRO and mental health counselors in our buildings
- A District Curriculum Director/STEM Director
- With this focus on collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking, we are moving into a more inquiry-based approach to learning.

So how did this restored attention on our students' educational program effect state test scores? I think you will agree the effect has been dramatic in just over 30 months during the period of August 2017 through February 2020.

- Achievement Indicators Met:
  - 2017: 4            16% Met
  - 2018: 5            20% Met
  - 2019: 10          41.7% Met
  
- Performance Index:
  - 2017: D            68.2%
  - 2018: C            71.1%
  - 2019: C            71.7%

- Gap Closing:
  - 2017: F            26.8%
  - 2018: C            71.1%
  - 2019: B            88.9%

This growth has come from the intentional work of our administrative team and teachers, targeting needs, providing aligned professional development activities, and planning with alignment and focus. This is NOT the profile of a failing school district!

Additionally, we have:

- Upgraded our facilities which are now second to none in ‘the valley’
- Our students are award winning artists
- Our students are being admitted directly into trade apprenticeships

It is my hope that every member can see that when your school district has the ability to concentrate on its core mission of educating the community’s children, good things happen and positive changes occur. These gains are due to the hard work of our students and a very caring, and committed, staff. We, as a school community, hope our greater community can see and appreciate the progress which is being made. Furthermore, we hope our community comes to see the Bellaire School District as a great asset and is worthy of continued investment. THERE HAS NOT BEEN A BETTER TIME TO BE A BIG RED!

We use the phrase ‘progress not perfection’. We say this knowing we are all human beings working in a human system-we know that no one is perfect. Yet we also have the optimistic belief that tomorrow will be better than today. We truly believe in our mission of preparing the community’s most precious resource, its children, for their future no matter what road they choose.

As I said earlier, unintended consequences sometimes leads to bad policy. I also indicated earlier that Bellaire has 11 EdChoice students currently, nine of which have never been in our buildings. This is a fragile time in Bellaire, fiscally. The potential negative effect of these 11 students if the EdChoice program remains unchecked and the House changes are not brought forward in \$ 575,000 in a district of just over 1300 ADM.

On behalf of the Board of Education, teachers, support staff and administrators of the Bellaire Local School District, thank you for giving us this opportunity to share the ‘Bellaire’ story and the awesome responsibility of educating the community’s child..

Respectfully,

Darren Jenkins, Superintendent, Bellaire Local School District