

Chairman Don Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher Program. I am Donald Mook Ed.D., Superintendent of the Columbiana Exempted Village School District. Columbiana Schools are home to the most recent Reader's Digest "Nicest Place in America", two national Blue Ribbon Schools and has produced students who have gone on to study at Harvard, become, doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, electricians, hair dressers, and one who was a recent recipient of a "Rhodes Scholarship" And Youngstown State's first Rhodes Scholar. We are not on the current EdChoice Expansion list of buildings that qualify based on the established metrics.

I am here today to encourage the committee to adopt meaningful reforms to the current choice system to include properly funding and properly governing our choice programs and our public school system. I would additionally ask the committee to hold all educational organizations that accept the public's tax dollars equally accountable.

Ohio is not like every other state in the union and Ohio's public school system, although not perfect, is not a broken or failed system. Our public school system is remarkably like the "Statue of Liberty" and represents the cornerstone of Ohio. We educate everyone regardless of gender, race, socio-economic status, national origin, or disability. Ohio's education system provides a diverse network of public – private and religious based options. Over time, we have begun to entangle the various systems. From *Everson v. Board of Education* in New Jersey to Ohio's own case, *Zelman v. Simmon-Harris*, we are working to blur the lines of distinction. Yet, our Ohio public system and constitution provides a fundamental right to citizens to be educated based on where they live. Hence, much of the problem with our system. Each of you on this committee have a unique and differing experience from the next. Although my group is here from the Mahoning Valley in Northeast Ohio, each one of our districts are a unique experience. Poverty levels are not the same, property values differ, our ethnic or racial makeup is not alike and the way the state chooses to fund us is entirely different. We each have asked our voters for funding to meet the needs of the students in our districts, and some are successful and some are not.

I am not here today to argue the origin or continued existence of a voucher system nor separation of church and state. I believe the legislators have spoken loudly to that issue based on the continued use and expansion to this program for which we are here today.

- I am here asking that you not further the strain of many successful gains that we are making in our public schools by reducing the resources necessary to overcome the many difficult issues we face in providing a free and appropriate public education.
- I ask that you provide the appropriate amount of money to educate students.
- I ask that you do not place the heavier burden upon local property taxes to run our network of school systems.

- I ask that you have a plan to fully fund educational options before you pass legislation that increases expenditures and reduces revenues of our public schools.
- I ask that you establish accountability and standards for all educational systems and apply the same rules to follow in order to use public dollars for the purpose of education of Ohio citizens.

My district, based on Ohio Department of Education FY19 School Funding Payment Reports, receives \$3,258.71 per pupil from the state of Ohio. Part of the problem, the state does not support its own system of choice when it deducts \$6,000 or \$4,250 a student for EdChoice, \$6,020 per student for open enrollment or Charter Schools, or up to \$27,000 per student for the Jon Peterson or Autism Scholarship. We lose local dollars that were voted by and intended for our public school district. There is something unlawful and or fundamentally flawed about this process. Last school year my district lost (\$619,267) in local dollars transferred through Ohio choice programs. If we did not have open enrollment in our district, we would lose (\$1,207,270) transferred out of our school system.

If each of the students who currently attend religious base schools qualify for EdChoice, we would lose an additional (\$324,000). This additional cost is for students who do not attend our school district, never attended our school district, and never intended to attend our school district. And we have never received funding for the education of these students.

Mr. Chairman and committee – I am asking you to fund our states school system fairly and appropriately. Representatives – Robert Cupp and John Patterson worked to establish a fair funding model. Yet, not only did we not move forward with their plan, we have legislation that works against where we currently stand. If you choose to expand choice options, do not transfer our current revenues and place a higher burden on the local taxpayer to keep our local schools in operation. Fund them fully. Our district has an aged population. We have not passed a school property tax levy since August of 1980 and have failed 3 Bond issues just to repair our buildings in my 11 years as superintendent. We have a great reputation for education and have been ranked in the top 100 school districts in Ohio, but – I am not certain we will pass any tax levies in the near future. Our success certainly has not permitted additional financial support from the community.

The legislature governs our public system – In fact, I work for you. The decisions you make establish the standards, and we are only as good / or bad / as the standards you set. And because you set those standards, we work hard to follow them. We have a responsibility to our students, parents and the taxpayer to work to meet all of the standards established by law for public schools. Where are the non-public standards? We live in a society that compares apples to apples.

Like the statue of Liberty, we do not select our families and students. We do not cherry pick the very best and forget the rest. When they are not working to their potential either academically or behaviorally, we can't tell them to go back to where they came from. The non-

public schools do send them back. When they don't come to school with the bare necessities, we work to provide them. We feed them, we cloth them, and we care for them beyond their complex educational needs. My teachers go beyond their obligation of their license to provide intellectual and social-emotional growth. They work to meet the needs of the entire child.

You hold the public education system accountable. Our teachers and administrators are licensed and educated to work for the public in Ohio. We are transparent. You audit our every move. And... We are responsible to you and the Ohio taxpayers. Who are the non-public schools responsible to?

We are tested with a tool that needs re-evaluated. It sends a message that almost half of the state is a failure.

- I ask the committee to make the recommendation(s) that do the same for any institution that utilizes the Ohio Taxpayer's dollars for educational purposes.
- Establish accountability and standards for all educational systems and apply the same rules to follow in order to use public dollars for the purpose of education of Ohio citizens.
- Re-tool our current accountability system that measures all institutions that are funded by the public under current law.
- And lastly, do not reduce our revenues established for the students who live in our districts.

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 conference committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide input regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher Program, I am happy to address any of your questions.