

Ottawa-Glandorf Local School District

Administrative Offices

630 Glendale Avenue

Ottawa, OH 45875

419-523-5261 or 419-523-5690 - Fax 419-523-5978



Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program. My name is Don Horstman, and I am the superintendent of Ottawa-Glandorf Local Schools. I am here today to encourage the committee to adopt meaningful voucher reforms as passed by the Ohio House.

The House plan represents a fundamental shift in our voucher system, from a failing schools approach to an income-based approach.

The failing schools model has failed Ohio. If we double down on it, Ohio will erratically lurch from year to year with an ever evolving and ever-growing list of schools that have been deemed failures.

The income-based approach is a slightly better option because it focuses on an opportunity for young people. It's important to remember, that's why we are here. The House plan also represents a fundamental shift in how these vouchers would be funded as well.

As you know, Ohio today uses the deduct method to fund performance based EdChoice vouchers, which is fundamentally flawed. By inappropriately deducting aid from local districts, it diverts locally voted tax dollars to pay for vouchers.

A less intrusive approach is the one contained in the House plan, which is for the state to fund these vouchers. In my view, if the state is going to issue vouchers, the state should pay for them, not use some sort of shell game to prop them up with locally voted property taxes.

As a superintendent this shell game is difficult to explain to people in my community – especially when you have just passed a new income tax levy. How do I explain to our local tax payers that while the ballot language of the income tax they just passed specifically states it is to be used to support their local public K-12 school system, that large portions of those funds are being diverted to unfunded mandates such as College Credit Plus and EdChoice vouchers for private schools? In my opinion both programs should follow the eligibility requirements for the Federal lunch program.

The law currently allows a family of four to be eligible for the EdChoice Expansion program if they have an annual income up to 200% of the Federal Poverty level, or approximately \$52,000. The proposal to increase that eligibility threshold to 250% to 300% of the Federal Poverty level, or \$64,375 to \$77,250 per year will have a negative impact our local school district, as a large number of additional families with elementary age children would be eligible, regardless of how well our local public school is performing on state assessments. To put this in perspective the median family income in our district in 2016 was \$71,779. So, if the eligibility level is set at 300%, then families with incomes in the upper half of our district would qualify for an almost completely free private education.

One of the most frustrating parts of this conversation is even at the 200% level, there are families available for free tuition at a private institution, who would not qualify for the Federal free or reduced

lunch program. If a family is not even able to qualify for a free lunch using federal guidelines, how can our state justify using public funds to provide free tuition at a private school?

While I would be appreciative of the move to a completely income - based voucher system, as a former history teacher, I have serious Constitutional concerns with any voucher system, based on the Establishment Clause, which intentionally separated the “state” from the “church”. If the members of the General Assembly are going to provide funds to these institutions, in what I view as a violation of the Establishment Clause, then at the very least, the schools receiving these funds should be held to the same standards of accountability as the public schools these funds are being diverted from. Any school accepting voucher funding should be required to accept all students, follow the same disciplinary due process procedures, special educations procedures, and state testing and accountability measures we as public schools in Ohio are required to follow.

Currently our local public school has a wonderful working relationship with the parochial school in our district, but I fear this relationship may change by necessity if the current voucher system is expanded. Ottawa-Glandorf Schools provides many services to our parochial school neighbors that we are not required to provide, based on the feeling that doing so is in the best interest of our community as a whole. We provide band instruction, professional development as requested, extracurricular transportation, and the school district contracts with the local police department to provide a School Resource Officer for the three public buildings, and the parochial school as well. My fear is that with our local share of state funding being essentially flatlined the last few years, which has resulted in staff reductions and cuts to programs, we will not be able to justify providing these services to a parochial school that is seeing a large increase in state funding being sent to them through the voucher system.

My final point really gets to the very heart of why we’re here today, and that’s Ohio’s school accountability system. Let me be clear: I am not opposed to accountability. I embrace it because I believe in the work we’re doing. What I and my fellow educators have a problem with is our broken system. If the members of the General Assembly are going to provide funds to private organizations, shouldn’t those organizations have to follow the same rules that the state’s own organizations have to follow?

Our students and teachers are spending too much time on state and federally mandated testing. These are not diagnostic tests designed to help inform and improve the education we are providing to students. These are high-pressure, high-stakes tests that have taken on a life of their own. These often invalid and constantly changing assessments, standards, and measurements, are then used to attack public schools as failing in order to further justify more accountability and more money being diverted from public schools to private schools. This creates a viscous and circular, self-fulfilling prophesy, to justify round after round of legislation such as the EdChoice voucher system.

I believe we can do better if all of us – legislators, educators and parents – truly collaborate and develop a school accountability system that works for **ALL** Ohio schools, both public and private and, most importantly, **ALL** Ohio students.

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 am happy to address your questions.