

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. I am Dr. Eugene Thomas, Superintendent of the Lowellville Local School District in Mahoning County. I am here today to highly encourage you and the committee to adopt the meaningful voucher reforms as passed by the Ohio House. Within the past several weeks, all of you have become aware Ohio uses the deduct method to fund performance-based EdChoice vouchers. This method is severely broken to the disconnect of what should be occurring to avoid an authentic unfunded mandate. Essential to the heart of the issue, by deducting funds from local districts, it diverts locally voted tax dollars to pay for state supported vouchers. Even with this ever growing mistake, a seemingly better approach is the one contained in the House plan, which is for the state to fund all vouchers directly. Simply put, if the state is going to issue vouchers, the state needs to pay for them, not use some sort of pretense to distract voters and tax payers from inadequately passed legislation that hides the fact that this unfunded mandate to supposedly support our kids is being funded by fleecing tax payers and siphoning off locally-voted property taxes.

At this time, please let me provide you a historical perspective and warrant my claims in support of the House plan over the other options as it relates directly to my region in Northeast Ohio. Mahoning County is best described as a depleted rust belt/manufacturing region that resulted in 12 of its 14 school districts experiencing double digit decreased population in student enrollment over the past ten years which can be attributed to the loss of manufacturing jobs and the closure of most of the area's steel mills (Valley, 2018). Currently, the Lowellville Local School District has 487 students enrolled in its K-12 program with 271 or 56% of those students attending as open enrolled students from surrounding districts. Primarily, the districts that contribute to the Lowellville School's open enrollment attendance include Youngstown City Schools, Campbell City Schools, Struthers City Schools, Boardman Local Schools, Springfield Local Schools and Poland Local Schools. In March of 2019, only 3 of those Districts were designated as EdChoice options (Ohio Department of Education, 2019). Subsequently, today, 8 of those Districts are designated as EdChoice options (Ohio Department of Education, 2020) with 5 of those Districts being penalized with this designation for the very first time including the Lowellville Local School District. The foremost conclusion for the unexpected designations relates directly back to the misconstrued performance on the Ohio school report card. It's been stated that the inflation of the EdChoice designations was due to "unintended consequences" of the legislation which had a clearly stated purpose in 2005 that the Ohio's EdChoice Scholarship was enacted to provide opportunities for students attending underperforming public school districts to go to private, often religious, schools. Well, in these specific cases and most importantly for the Lowellville School District, this assertion of failure is entirely false! To counter this unintended consequence, not only did Lowellville Schools and District meet the acceptable criteria of achievement on its most recent school report cards, it exceeded goals set by the state in various other areas.

Now, let's take a closer look at Lowellville High School's 2020-2021 designation for EdChoice. For many consecutive years including the most recent report card, the school received an "A" for graduation and astonishingly, this year, an "F" for progress which consequently is attributed to the value added formula. Not only are these grades contradictory to one another, the use of the value-added algorithm to penalize a school, which indeed "met" the state required overall grade

of "C" is contemptible. Explicitly, there are methodological concerns about the education value-added system and has been discredited in various studies including the overwhelming evidence provided by research expert Dr. Audrey Amrein-Beardsley that, "...it has flaws that must be addressed before widespread adoption" (Amrein-Beardsley, 2008). Not only did Ohio adopt value-added wholeheartedly as a valid and reliable measure on the Ohio report card system, the study points out that the lack of external reviews, validity studies of the model, its insufficient user friendliness, missing data which contributed to methodological issues, regression to the mean of larger populations of students that meet the grade and most disturbingly, background issues such as poverty discredit the liability to truly effect and report accurate student achievement and growth. These inconsistencies are outlandish. Nevertheless, I succumb to the bigger picture that the new legislation is now focusing on family poverty levels.

With that Chairman Jones and the members of the Conference Committee, please allow the record to reflect my testimony on the "bigger picture" as it relates to the proposed poverty levels in my district. First, how can Ohio legislatures continue to support an accountability system enacted by the state to "grade" schools and districts especially when the schools and districts achieve the overall required grades hence penalize them with the enhanced threat to "expand" school choice due to performance let alone poverty levels. Sure, I concede that various studies support that students in poverty generally have lower student achievement levels as compared to their peers. Although, let me point out distinctly that situations exist, like Lowellville, whereas 46% of its students are in poverty, excel and repeatedly meet and/or exceed each year the requirements set by the state of Ohio. To no avail, they are going to be penalized, yet again, in such a public way that devalues the successful work being done by an entire district of professionals, parents, and community members thus castigate even further its schools and district that is again, reaching success according to the Ohio Department of Education (Report Card, 2019). This is a true travesty in the eye of education. Similarly to a flawed value added system, imagine in today's society if medical doctors, like schools and districts, were "graded" based upon their mortality rates; the general practitioners would receive A's while the cancer specialists who are some of the most brilliant minds in our nation would receive F's. Please, we cannot let a healthy school district like Lowellville and many others, yet again, according to standards set by the state, be helplessly penalized! Stop grading our students with the "one-size-fits-all" approach and begin measuring school performance by measuring the gains in student learning posted longitudinally. We need to stop the EdChoice option and alternative legislation from moving forward, expanding the poverty level threshold beyond the House's recommendations, and continuing to obliterate our schools and districts at the expense of our children and taxpayers. Even more, it would be aberrant to ignore the facts and reward non-public schools that are not held to any such standards that are comparable to public schools. I cannot even try to predict let alone forecast the devastation this legislation will cause. Specifically for Lowellville, considering that any increased poverty threshold which in fact is not interrelated to a bona fide poverty level will just entice and lure hundreds of successful open enrollment and resident students attending Lowellville away to "try something different" by in part, thanks to the proactive marketing campaigns and totally mischaracterized assertions being made by the local non-public schools. If this legislation doesn't get fixed, we will be faced with the grim task to try and "resuscitate dinosaurs" and ultimately fail all the students that attend public schools today!

At this time, I'd like to shift my focus and point out a few statistics that are "elementary" at best with understanding why to increase the poverty level threshold to determine EdChoice eligibility is a dire alternative. First of all, let's not hide behind a "poverty smokescreen" to push inferior legislation through with an expansion and a clear conscience without first examining it scrupulously based upon facts and statistics. To begin with, the poverty level for a family of four in Ohio is reported to be \$25,750 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2019). Let's put that into perspective. The current legislation is proposing to do away with the school performance measure to determine eligible Districts for school choice and rely on a proposed 200% Federal Poverty Guideline for eligibility for a family of four which equates to \$52,400 (Federal Poverty Guidelines, 2020). In contrast, the median 5-year estimate household income for Mahoning County during the years of 2013-2017 was \$43,251 (United States Census, 2017). To add further confusion, the legislation proposed will open the doorway for future expansion of school choice for students in poverty and again, is hiding behind a disguise of the label of poverty when in fact; the average household in the 5-year span has never and would ever be characterized as poverty until now. Let's not rewrite the perils of this legislation and call it what it is; another unfunded initiative and blatant attack on public education in the efforts to privatize schools and once again, further threaten the existence of public education in Ohio. Remarkably, public education continues to be resilient and hang on by a thread due to the historical lack of equitable and adequate funding which has been enabled by the Ohio legislatures for so many years of disregard to the current state funding system to continue and fail to provide for common schools (DeRolph, 1997). Please do not put the final nail in the coffin! To reiterate my contentions, the House plan of income based approach represents a fundamental shift and is definitely the lesser of the two evils when compared to the flawed accountability system.

Chairman Jones and members of the Conference Committee, the flawed schools model has failed Ohio. If the current trends continue to allow expansion of choice, Ohio will erratically lurch from year to year with an ever-evolving and ever-growing list of schools that have been erroneously deemed failures and eventually be forced to succumb to full choice. The income-based approach is much healthier because it focuses on indisputable data that does not impose annual moving targets like the report cards which have continuously changed over the past 20 plus years. Also, the House plan represents a fundamental shift in how these vouchers would be funded, directly by the state, and will allow the state to monitor, regulate and inevitably intervene when this legislation creates a new wild west as pop-up private schools begin appearing in every neighborhood. Imagine the stresses and uncertainty I feel for the future of the Lowellville School District and many similar ones around the state that participate in open enrollment, have not passed an operating levy in over 20 years, are operating effectively and efficiently, and are on the state's guarantee with its funding. This blanket legislation doubles the financial penalties and is an unwarranted punitive threat to the overall existence which will lead to an evitable demise. Just think, unlike the legislation passed in 1997, Chapter 3314 which limited community schools to mostly urban and poverty stricken areas, the accountability model of expanding EdChoice will eventually overtake and make eligible every public school system as it exists today and lead it to the inevitable, extinction. At the very least, the income based approach of EdChoice legislation will delay this obliteration and allow for another day for the legislatures to get it right.

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 and listen to why I, as a career educator and devout Catholic, am opposed to the expanded EdChoice legislation as it relates to the accountability system and support the voucher reforms as passed by the Ohio House. Let me emphasize that no one here today, in our classrooms or in our community is opposed to accountability. I embrace it because I believe in the work we're doing. What we as educators and tax payers have a problem with is our broken system. To emphasize a few final thoughts; I hope and emphatically encourage you "stop the hemorrhaging" and support commonsense legislation of the income based approach. Ironically, at this time, all I can do is pray that this alternative doesn't create a new beast to expand and reach the 400% threshold which would include my family; which I passionately and publically declare, in no way, shape or form should I be statistically included in any "poverty equation" that is being proposed to "fix" a mess as it exists today! Thank you for your time and I am happy to address your questions.

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