

Good evening Chairman Jones and members of the committee, thank you for having me this evening to speak to you regarding Ohio's EdChoice scholarship program.

My name is Jennifer Harden and I am the President of the Riverside Local Board of Education in Lake County. I have served my community as a School Board member for the last 6 years and the last 4 of those have also included service as the Board President. I am also a mom to school aged children in grades 10th, 8th and 6th grade. I am passionate about my position, my community and what the changes to the EdChoice voucher program mean to Riverside.

Eleven years ago, when I enrolled my oldest child in school, I knew I wanted to be involved in their education and in their schools, little did I know it would lead me here. 2 years into my older son's time at Riverside and my daughters first year, our district was forced to make large cuts to our budget. Gone were many teachers, administrators, bussing for the high school and state minimum bussing for the rest, art, music and gym down to only 12 weeks/year. My daughter never had a winter concert throughout her elementary years, my boys had just 2 years each. Riverside had gone without passing a new money operating levy from 2004 until 2017. Not only had we not passed a levy in many years, but we were faced with unfunded mandates such as College Credit Plus, we saw the elimination of TPPT, rising special education costs and no additional help from the State of Ohio. This had a direct impact on the day to day operations of our district and more importantly to our students, the children that we promised to educate. We watched our enrollment plummet as our open enrollment costs were rising and families choosing parochial schools over Riverside. All these things severely impacted our ability to provide the kind of educational experience we wanted all our students to have. Finally, after many years of struggling we managed to convince our community to believe in us again and to support us with a new money levy. We were able to restore all of what was lost. Our families began to feel the pride they once did at Riverside. We changed the culture and our community saw that and felt that. Instead of pay to participate fees upwards of \$800 we were able to make it affordable to all again. We were able to start expanding our class offerings at the high school again. Bussing was restored and we no longer had huge lines of cars as over 2,000 people tried to enter and exit our high school campus by car each day. The painful days of Riverside's past are

gone, but they certainly have not been forgotten. If EdChoice remains in the form that it has been originally proposed the old days will come back to haunt us. We will see a decrease by \$1.7 million each year and that will be absolutely devastating. The new and improved Riverside that we have worked so hard to make amazing for our students and our staff will be no more because we will be forced to make cuts once again. We cannot ask our voters for more new money, we promised them that we would not do that for as long as possible and we intend to keep that promise.

Parochial and private schools are not held to the same standard as public schools, yet you want to divert public funds to them. How would these school be held accountable, both financially and academically? We are being punished by an already flawed report card system and what little state money we receive is potentially being siphoned away, yet these other types of schools are not held to the same standard.

There is no clear path on how the state of Ohio sees that this can be sustained long term.

As a parent, as a School Board member and as the President of the Riverside Local Board of Education I implore you to find an equitable resolution to this prior to April 1st. The children in our district, and my 3 children Cullen, Campbell and Kyele, are counting on you to make a decision that is fair to public education and to our community members.