

House Bill 9 Conference Committee Testimony

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Chairman Jones and members of House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program. I am Dr. James Kalis, Superintendent of the Riverside Local School District in Lake County and I am also a parent of 3 children, one who is still of compulsory age.

I know that my time is limited, so I will be brief:

Please consider the following points in regards to the prospect of the expansion of school vouchers:

Up to this current school year, the Riverside Local School District had six elementary schools, one middle school, and one large high school with grades 8-12 with a districtwide enrollment of nearly 4,300 students. We opened two new large state-of-the-art elementary schools due to community support in passing a bond levy in 2016. This bond project allowed the district to decommission four aging elementary schools providing enhanced instructional opportunities and more operational and staffing efficiencies. Of all the schools that now remain in our district, it was Riverside High School that was initially impacted by the EdChoice initiative. In fact there were 18 schools in nine Lake County school districts that were on the list deemed as underperforming. Under the initial Budget Bill 166 early estimates of lost revenue amounted to about \$1.7 million for Riverside.

Both the Senate and House proposals would remove Riverside High School from the EdChoice list, however there are still many more school districts throughout the state that may be severely impacted.

Both my wife and I have taught in parochial schools administered by the Cleveland Diocese and our three children attended a catholic grade school. They all appeared to have learned and enjoyed their time there, but never did we think, as employees of the Diocese or parents of grade school children that tax money should fund their parochial education. Especially when public schools are evaluated by a metric which private and parochial are not subject to. In essence, this metric has the power to label public school buildings as “Failing,” take funds from the district, and reallocate them to private and religious entities that are not evaluated using the same metric as public schools.

And remember, private and parochial schools often use an application process and an entrance exam to determine whether or not a student can attend. They can remove students more easily too, if the student is not academically engaged. Public schools are required to take everyone regardless and in the absence of these inequitable filters.

To me, EdChoice is like someone who is unhappy with the performance of public transit- He may unfairly think it is too slow, unreliable, uncomfortable and expect to receive tax money back with the desire to hire a private livery like an uber or perhaps a taxi service. Or he could be unhappy with the local police or fire department. Surely, it would not make a whole lot of sense passing legislation for tax money to be given back to him because he might want to seek his own police or fire protection. And even with these examples, none of the scenarios are fundamentally intertwined with religion as is EdChoice.

Please understand that I believe in the mission of the private and parochial schools with which I have associated. Many in our community do good work. I just believe that by providing financial support through the EdChoice initiative will be cause for some difficult decisions this legislature will have to make down the road. Providing support for traditional mainstream private schools is one thing, however this legislature should know that there will be a time when you will have to indulge in any and all nontraditional, unorthodox schools that come along with absolute tolerance and without discrimination.

Moreover, Article VI section 2 of The Ohio Constitution states: *The General Assembly shall make such provisions, by taxation, or otherwise, as, with the income arising from the school trust fund, will secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools throughout the state; but nor religious or other sect, or sects, shall ever have any exclusive right to, or control of, any part of the school funds of this state.*

In closing, I would like to encourage the Ohio General Assembly to focus on fixing our current school funding system that was declared unconstitutional in 1997. Finding an equitable solution for all common public schools will be a challenge. Your constituents clearly have faith in your ability to serve this state and their interests by virtue of the office you hold. I too, implore you to recalibrate your efforts as I have confidence in you as well.

