

Representative Jones, Senator Huffman, Senator Peterson, Senator Fedor, Representative Edwards and Representative Robinson, thank you for allowing me to testify today.

My name is Julie Hartman. I live in Reynoldsburg, Ohio. I have lived in Ohio all my life and am a product of public education. I am vice-chair of the newly established Reynoldsburg Education Foundation which supports the Reynoldsburg City School District.

For many years, I have been terribly frustrated with the inability of Ohio's school choice movement to bring better educational opportunities to our children and have been terribly saddened by the harm it has done. As a result, I am compelled to oppose the use of public school dollars for vouchers to private schools. I have many reasons for my position, most of which you no doubt have heard from other Ohioans, including Mr. William Phillis on February 17. But I want to focus on just a couple things to consider as you move forward with your discernment.

First of all, I'm a mom. I know how moms feel about sending their children to school. It's anxiety-provoking, to say the least. It's really hard to give up our children to an institution for six or more hours a day. We want to maintain control. We constantly wonder if we're making the right decisions. When we're in a position where we do have choices, we want to take advantage of that opportunity, and even feel obligated to make a choice. We're afraid that we would be letting our children down if we let things get decided for us. In short, we feel compelled to advocate for our children's education.

I get all that, because at each transition, from preschool to kindergarten, elementary to middle school, middle school to high school, my husband and I considered private or parochial schooling for our daughter and deliberated long and hard to make our decision. (Although, all along, we believed that we were obligated to pay for it without any help from the state, because it was, after all, private education.)

I'm also a retired public educator. I worked for 30 years as a school psychologist in southeastern Ohio. I worked in the urban schools of Zanesville, and the rural schools of Muskingum, Morgan, and Perry Counties. In my work with children who had disabilities or suspected disabilities, I made many home visits.

- visits to trailers where four kids shared the same tiny bedroom
- visits to apartments that were bare except for a single worn out couch and a couple of kitchen chairs
- visits where we conducted meetings on the hood of a car because the family was too embarrassed to let us inside
- visits where I knocked on the door and no one answered, even though there was clearly someone at home
- visits to foster homes, where, occasionally, foster parents were hardly able to take care of their biological families, let alone additional children

- visits to elderly grandparents who were barely able to care for the grandchildren in their custody
- visits with families who were just worried about getting a meal on the table that evening
- visits with parents who were totally overwhelmed by their child's disability and didn't have the money, skills, knowledge, or transportation to access the resources their child truly needed, if the resources were even available within a reasonable distance from their homes
- visits with parents who were themselves disabled or incapacitated by physical or mental illness

Just like me, these folks wanted the best for their children, but while some had choices available to them, they were often unable to effectively advocate for their children's education. Out of despair, they often looked to someone else to make those decisions for them. These were the children I advocated for, because, through no fault of their own, and, in many cases, through no fault of their parents, they had no one else but the agents of public schools to advocate for them.

These kids are still here. They are many. They are in Ohio's public schools. These vulnerable children have been and will continue to be hurt by school choice options that take public dollars away from public schools and give it to private entities, leaving the public schools with even less money than what is adequate to meet their needs. They're hurt much more than most of the kids who might lose a voucher to supplement a private school education. Believe me, the parents of these vulnerable kids have bigger problems to stress over than waiting until April 1st to find out what school their child will attend – many won't know until August. I implore our state leaders to think about these most vulnerable children, the ones who don't have family members who are able to advocate for them. Put them first. Be their advocate. Be their champion.

And when the advocate mom like me comes to you, worried about how her children might fare in a public versus a private school, acknowledge her anxiety – it is real. But try to assure her that her children will be fine, because they have a great mom backing them up no matter where they go to school.

Even though I am an anxious advocate mom, my daughter never went to Grace Christian, Liberty Christian, St. Pius, Columbus Academy, Hartley, or a charter school. She attended Reynoldsburg City Schools for all 13 of her school-aged years. I worried all the way through, but I would have worried no matter what school she attended, as many moms can attest to. At Reynoldsburg, my daughter experienced a fantastically diverse group of classmates of various backgrounds, cultures, and faiths. She experienced larger than optimal class sizes, limited classroom resources and course offerings, and limited extracurriculars.

She also experienced a community-supported teacher strike where she even took part in the demonstrations, because all those fantastic teachers were advocating for kids, for her. In fact,

the community support for doing what is right for our kids by taking on unfair state funding and massively flawed accountability systems, is the impetus for the formation of the Reynoldsburg Education Foundation that I am involved in today.

My daughter is fine. She is better than fine. Her character, compassion, and faith were only strengthened by her public school experiences. Mr. Phillis pointed out that the common school system is foundational to our country. I can attest to that. My daughter is better for having been a public school student. She is well prepared to serve and lead as a citizen in our democracy. In fact, she is currently training to become a public school teacher, where she can be an advocate and champion for her students, and especially for those who need her the most.