

February 20, 2020

Testimony: Kathleen Knight Abowitz

My name is Kathleen Knight Abowitz. I live at 5 Bull Run in Oxford, and I am a School Board member in the Talawanda City School district. I work at Miami University in the College of Education. My kids are recent graduates of the Talawanda district; I am a proud graduate of Virginia public schools.

As a School Board member, education professor, and a taxpayer, I ask you to please adopt SB 89. It will diminish and reduce the performance-based voucher program currently in EdChoice.

- 1) Ohio's radical performance-based voucher program assumes that public schools aren't ALREADY held accountable by the public. Senator Matt Huffman says that we need to keep performance-based vouchers because the threat of losing money to private school vouchers holds public schools accountable.
 - a. Senator Huffman, with all due respect, is wrong about this. Public schools in Ohio are already held accountable to the public --- by the way we are funded. Ohio schools must regularly go back to the public for funding, as that is how the funding is structured here. If we don't perform, we cannot get a tax increase from our local voters.
 - b. In my district, Talawanda City Schools, we are accountable to our local community. Like all school districts, we must go back to the voters to get increases in our general fund. These are NOT easily won elections. In May 2019, 60% of the school levies passed in Ohio. In May 2018, only 40% did. Voters demand high performance from their districts. Why does Senator Huffman believe we need even more accountability than this? Does he not really believe in local control after all?
 - c. Senator Huffman also seems to have a double standard for accountability. The private schools he wants go support with vouchers have virtually ZERO public accountability, even as they can and WILL refuse to admit any students they deem unfitting, unwelcome, or uneducable. Private schools' finances are not open to scrutiny. Their curriculum is not subject to external review or standards. Their outcomes are not evaluated by a state report card. I have nothing personally against private schools --but where exactly is the accountability here?

- 2) We need to get rid of performance-based vouchers because they are based on some half-truths about who will use vouchers and why. Advocates of these vouchers say that they will help people “escape” our “failing” public schools. There are two problems with this claim.
- a. Vouchers are, in most cases, a way to help more families attend private schools, most of whom would already be choosing private schools because of religious reasons. A well-documented study of the Indiana voucher program in 2017 found that over half of the families who received vouchers were those who had NEVER sent their children to public schools at all.¹
 - b. Should the state of Ohio be sending public funds to private schools when the legislature still has not fixed the broken public funding system in this state? Lawmakers are literally proposing to pay for kids to attend private schools when they have not fixed the same system that was deemed unconstitutional by the Ohio Supreme Court in 1997. That seems irresponsible to me.
 - c. Our public schools are NOT failing. We do an excellent job with the amazing, and wide range of children who walk through our doors. We educate everyone, and proudly. It’s important to remember how crucial it is that public schools are inclusive. Private schools will not accept all the children that apply for their schools. Because of learning disabilities, or sexual orientation, or other reasons, private schools will shut their doors to some kids. This is a simple fact.

Public schools are not perfect. We welcome high standards held up for us by our communities. But there are high standards, and then there are double standards.

Please support House Bill 89, which is the best option in front of you at this point to limit the extensive harms that the Ed Choice performance-based voucher program will bring to education in our state.

¹ Corey Turner, Eric Weddle, and Peter Balonon-Rosen, “The Promise and Peril of School Vouchers,” National Public Radio, May 12, 2017. Available: <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/05/12/520111511/the-promise-and-peril-of-school-vouchers>