

Chairman Jones and members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony regarding Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program.

My name is Melissa Federman, I am a resident of Shaker Heights.

Our family moved to Shaker Heights last year specifically for the strong public schools - they are at the heart of the Shaker community and are a tremendous source of pride for local families. We were leaving a private pre-K through grade 8 school and intentionally trading our tuition dollars for increased taxes in Shaker Heights and the ability for our children to matriculate in a strong and diverse – in every way – public school district. My husband graduated from Shaker Heights and it is common for alumni families to return to raise their kids here. We toured three different elementary schools in Shaker which confirmed 1) it was the district for us and 2) that it didn't matter in which part of the city we found a house – the schools were all excellent.

Fast forward 18 months. Shocking to us was seeing two Shaker Heights schools – including our incredible home elementary, Onaway – being among the more than 1,200 public schools across Ohio that were newly placed on the expanded EdChoice voucher eligible list this year. My second grader is in her second year learning and loving Mandarin at Onaway. We received notices from the State Board of Education regarding our 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders exceling in reading – being among the top students in the state. A failing school does not produce this. In fact, the state's own recent report (2018–19) card gave Onaway a B, hardly a failing grade. And a recent national assessment by Polarislist ranked Shaker Heights High School number one in the state for placing students at top U.S. universities – Harvard, Princeton and MIT. It was also named a 'gem,' characterizing schools with greater than 15% of students eligible for free/reduced fee lunch. We did not receive an 'A' which means there is more work to do – and **we welcome you to support us to better support our students**. EdChoice does not accomplish this.

I have a background in research and evaluation. I think we all agree that it is appropriate to collect timely data on all schools and use it for monitoring, planning and resource allocation. Shaker's schools and many of the other newly eligible EdChoice schools are among the best schools in their regions – public or private – and are in some of the top-performing districts in our state. I beseech you all to visit Onaway Elementary and other schools on the newly expanded list where the recent report cards are not aligning with the data used to inform EdChoice policy. I believe you will be as impressed as we were in our first visit and continue to be. **Please revisit and revise the eligibility before expansions to the policy go into effect – our schools shouldn't be there**. No one in Shaker Heights asked for them to be. This mismatch begs the question – whose interests are being served by the expansion?

I also ask that you consider what drives the data you are considering. We have vulnerable children in many of our schools. Their vulnerabilities stem from poverty and racism and families in transition. I do not believe our schools are failing our children, but Ohio social policy may be. There is much that can be done with policy solutions in Ohio that would serve vulnerable children and their families without undermining our public schools, the very fabric of our community. (I

am happy to follow up with the committee on policy ideas that would improve readiness of all children for kindergarten and beyond.)

I am also a product of both parochial and public education and have heard legislators quoted who are concerned that some Ohio children do not have access financially to private schools their families may wish for them to attend. My family could not afford parochial school tuition for me and my two siblings – the Catholic school we attended provided a sliding fee scale based on my family’s income that allowed us to attend. Our school was staffed by nuns, modestly paid lay teachers and volunteers, which kept the operational costs low, and it received financial support from the local parish. Private schools in Shaker Heights provide scholarships. These are examples of financing that private schools, should they wish to be accessible to lower income families, utilize. Public dollars are for the public good including public education. Creating a false narrative about failing public schools is not the answer to families who are interested in sending their children to private schools but find them unaffordable.

If left unchanged, EdChoice will have dire financial consequences for one of the strongest public school districts in Ohio, and ultimately negatively impact our entire community. I appreciate your leadership in education policy for our state and thank you for your urgent attention to this issue.

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. I am happy to address your questions and can be reached at [mtfederman@gmail.com](mailto:mtfederman@gmail.com) or 216-338-4020.

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