

February 20, 2020

Chairman Jones and Members of the House Bill 9 Conference Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today in support of Ohio's EdChoice voucher program based on school performance. I am Rikki Gelbaum, middle class mother of three from Youngstown, Ohio.

As I have reviewed the testimonials provided to you by educators and administrators from across the state, I began to question what impact my title of "middle class mother" would hold as I testify before you today. My anxiety began to bubble, and continues in this moment. This same anxiety grips my family because our son's educational future hangs in limbo and in your hands.

As I stated in my introduction, my family resides in Youngstown, and given that The Youngstown Academic Distress Commission was birthed within these walls, I am undoubtedly certain that you understand the long history of academic decline, and failing status of our public school district.

In 2013, my husband and I willingly bought a home in Youngstown to invest in the city - believing Youngstown is in the midst of a renaissance, but the public school system has not shown to be on that same trajectory. Faced with this realization we as a family chose to apply for an EdChoice voucher for our son to attend Akiva Academy, a Jewish day school located in Youngstown. Full transparency, my husband and I are both Jewish. However, Akiva serves children of every race, creed, and socio-economic background, with Jewish children making up only 13% of the student population. Akiva has helped shape our son's religious identity, as well as strengthening ours, while simultaneously destroying stereotypes of the Jewish community through accepting and nurturing all who wish to become part of the Akiva family by sharing of our culture and beliefs in a rigorous academic setting. Akiva Academy is the best choice for our son's education.

My experience in tandem with my son has been so profound that I have accepted a role as a member of the Board for Continuing Jewish Education where I work with other parents, teachers, Rabbis, and members of The Youngstown Jewish Federation to further improve the Akiva experience.

This is my EdChoice experience - one of choice; to choose a better path for my child, and hopefully for other children in our Youngstown community. With such drastic and hasty changes to the EdChoice program, this story could be re-written. If the wholesale

removal of a performance-based voucher program were to be replaced with a strictly income-based program, a family like mine is left out in the cold.

I work two jobs, and in addition to my husband's income, we would be just above the financial threshold for inclusion, with Akiva then becoming financially unfeasible. Our financial situation is synonymous with so many other families at Akiva, and a decision made in haste by you and fellow legislators could and would have a crippling effect on Akiva and so many other schools like it across the state in the subsequent school years.

Lastly, I am not anti-public school. Our school taxes still go to our home public school district even though my son does not. Akiva Academy is not anti-public school. My community is fighting tooth and nail to regain control of our schools, and I am in lockstep with them, but Akiva is the best fit for my son. I am grateful for its existence and the EdChoice voucher that enables him to attend the school of our choice.

Please, take the necessary time that this issue requires rather than make broad sweeping decisions in a very short amount of time that could change the future course of so many children and families. We are talking about our greatest asset - our children. Please do not fail them. Thank you for time. I am willing to answer any questions you may have.