



## HB 122 – The Opportunity Scholarship

Rep. Kyle Koehler, Sponsor Testimony

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Chairman Blessing, Vice Chair Jones, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 122, the Ohio Opportunity Scholarship Program.

Across our state, children are stuck in schools that do not meet their needs, but are unable to attend an alternative institution simply because their families cannot pay for the cost of attendance. Programs exist today (such as district open enrollment, the EdChoice Scholarship Program, and the Cleveland Scholarship Program) which assist parents in placing their child in a school that is the right fit for them. However, these programs are based on limited geography, a limited, income-based model, and, worst of all, the “failing schools model.”

This legislation addresses the inadequacies of our state’s current educational choice system. HB 122 creates The Opportunity Scholarship Program, an income-based program for Ohio’s children in elementary, middle, or high school, and empowers them to attend a chartered non-public school of their choice.

The legislation would create a separately funded, income-based scholarship program to offset the cost of attending a chartered non-public school for families with a combined income of up to 400% Federal Poverty Level (FPL).

The bill sets the maximum scholarship amounts at \$5,000, for students in grades K-8, and at \$7,500 for students in grades 9-12. Students receive the maximum scholarship amount if they qualify because they received an EdChoice or Cleveland Scholarship in the previous school year, regardless of family income. However, for all other eligible students, there is a **tiered system** for scholarship amounts.

For reference, for a family of four, 200% of the 2019 FPL is \$51,500. A family of this size with a net income of \$51,500 or less would qualify for the full scholarship amount. By basing this scholarship on income, and funding it separately, the bill removes the current “failing schools” model and “district deduct” which have not promoted better schools in our communities.

This legislation is very similar to House Bill 200 of the last GA with several changes that were worked on over the nine committee hearings the bill had before we ran out of time.

We have removed language which would allow families to utilize leftover Opportunity Scholarship money later on for higher education. We have added language that continues to limit the program to 60,000 students – this includes, indexing which would only occur if the number of accepted students rose to that limit threshold (which has never happened in the history of the EdChoice Program).

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, if you have paid attention to the news over the past several months, you know we are on a collision course regarding the “failing schools model” foundational to the original EdChoice Program. You may have seen *The Plain Dealer* describe a “potentially massive expansion of vouchers and charter schools” or read *The Dayton Daily News’* report that “the number of school districts affected will soar from 32 to 137.”

Given that the number of school districts categorized as “failing” is set to quadruple next fall, these programs will **massively increase** if current law is left in place.

Simply put, the original EdChoice voucher program is about to explode.

As I stated during introductory comments in this committee’s very first meeting, I attended public school, but graduated from a parochial school. My wife, who went on to attain a PhD in psychology, is a product of the public school system. I did thirteen years of youth work in the public school system. My children have been home educated. All this to say – I’ve seen countless children thrive in public, private, parochial, and home environments.

**I present this bill today because I believe each child is unique, that different children thrive in different environments, and that *a family’s income and zip code should not be the sole determinants the quality of their child’s education.*** The Opportunity Scholarship does an important thing: it empowers parents living in poverty to have a choice about where their child goes to school.

It takes dollars set aside for the education of children and empowers parents to decide how to best educate their children. History tells us that many of those parents will continue to send their children to the public schools that they grew up in and graduated from. Others will choose a different school that fits their children’s needs.

By expanding the educational opportunities through this new scholarship for children of low income families, we will ensure that no child in Ohio is stuck in a school that does not effectively prepare them for the future due to inability to pay. Vitally, we also divert the coming collision we are destined to face if we do not address the current “failing school model”.

Chairman Blessing, thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important fix. I look forward to you hearing from students and parents who have benefited from this program. I welcome any questions you or the Committee may have.