



Interested Party Testimony
House Bill 166 (Operating Budget FY 2020-2021)
Kevin Bacon, President & CEO
April 2019

Co-Chair Cupp, Co-Chair Patterson, and members of the Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, my name is Kevin Bacon, and I am the President & CEO of School Choice Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on House Bill 166.

School Choice Ohio (SCO) is a statewide organization that educates parents on the education options available for their children and advocates for the expansion of quality education options for every Ohio child. We work to empower families to choose the best learning environment for their children, whether it's traditional public school, private school, charter school, or through virtual or blended learning or homeschooling.

There are approximately 1.7 million students in Ohio public schools, meaning traditional and charter schools. There are 170,000 students in private schools, of which 46,000 students are using scholarships, and there are 30,000 home schooled students. At SCO, we also focus on providing guidance to parents interested in Ohio's five private school scholarship programs:

- Autism Scholarship, for any student with autism;
- Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship, for any student with special needs;
- Cleveland Scholarship & Tutoring Program, for any student assigned to the Cleveland Metropolitan School District;
- EdChoice Scholarship Program, for students assigned to or attending a designated public school;
- Income-based (EdChoice Expansion), for students in grades K-6 whose family income is under 200% of the federal poverty guidelines.

School choice options help thousands of students across Ohio receive the education that is the best fit for their learning needs.

House Bill 166 includes a number of items that impact Ohio's students and scholarship programs. In addition to highlighting those areas, I would also like to share some recommendations for your consideration.

School Choice Programs

Ohio's Income-Based Scholarship Program, also known as EdChoice Expansion, provides students whose family income is at or below 200 percent of federal poverty guidelines a scholarship to be used toward tuition at the participating private school of their choice. The demand for this program is high. In fact, each year, there are more applicants than there are scholarships available.

The program, funded through a line-item appropriation, is being phased-in with the addition of one grade each year. SCO supports the continued phase-in of this program, which adds sixth grade this fall and seventh grade in the 2020-21 school year.

One change to consider for the scholarship programs is to change the application period to year-round rather than during a short amount of time each year. All scholarship students, new and those who want to renew, must apply during a short window of time or lose this opportunity. There's no reason to not allow families to exercise these school choice options anytime in the year when they can exercise public school options anytime. To address issues with funding caps, there should be a date set where initial awards are made.

Funding Plan

Although not currently in the budget, I would like to address a few of the provisions in the proposed school funding plan. As noted in previous testimony on the report from the committee to write the funding plan, neither charter school nor scholarship funding was reviewed in detail in writing what is being called the "Fair Funding" plan. With almost 200,000 students receiving their education outside of the traditional public school setting, we want to ensure that any funding plan takes the needs of these students into consideration as well.

Additionally, there is a proposal in the funding plan to severely reduce transportation or even eliminate transportation for scholarship students. SCO cautions against making statewide changes that would result in students being unable to attend the school that best fits their educational needs. These are Ohio students, and their parents are Ohio taxpayers, and the state needs to ensure that the students have proper transportation to school, each day.

Academic Distress Commissions

There are some provisions in HB 166 to make changes to Ohio's Academic Distress Commissions (ADCs), as well as many other bills pending to make changes or to completely eliminate ADCs. While there may be specific issues that need to be addressed, when deciding what changes to make, it is important to remember why ADCs are established. Under current law, an ADC is created when a district receives three consecutive overall "F" grades on its state report card. When making changes to the composition of ADCs, ask yourself, "How does this help students?" If a student has been attending a district that has received an overall "F" for three years, they have not received the quality education they deserve, and any changes to ADC law should ensure that the district moves forward rather than backward.

Conclusion

House Bill 166 provides an opportunity for Ohio to improve on its many school options, from public school to private school to homeschool. Ohio is fortunate to have a variety of quality education options, and it is important that families in all zip codes and of all income levels are empowered to choose the best learning environment to meet the unique needs of their children. School Choice Ohio looks forward to working with you throughout the budget process to ensure that Ohio families continue to be empowered by educational choice.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 166. I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have.