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**March 9, 2015****House Finance Committee****K-12 Education Subcommittee**

Agudath Israel of America

Rabbi Yitz Frank, Ohio Director

Chairman Cupp, Ranking Member Phillips, and members of the committee. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony on the main operating budget, House Bill 64. House Bill 64 conveys an important message about education. Ohio is making children the priority. Where a child attends school isn't as important as the goal that he or she receives the best possible education in that setting. Students should be given the resources and opportunity they need. Parents should have the ability to direct their child's education and this budget makes these points in several ways.

There are close to 2 million students in the state of Ohio. Most of them attend traditional public schools. Within that group, some attend magnet, vocational, or other types of specialized public schools. Other students attend public community schools or e-schools, and about 10% of students attend nonpublic schools or are homeschooled. All of them together make up the fabric that is Ohio's youth.

On behalf of the Orthodox Jewish community and their network of nonpublic schools, we commend Governor Kasich and the General Assembly for many of the encouraging policies found in the budget bill and wish to respectfully submit some suggestions for improvement.

**Auxiliary services and administrative cost reimbursement**

We appreciate the increased funding for auxiliary services and administrative cost reimbursement for students in chartered nonpublic schools. The percentage increase is equal to the increase for public education in the GRF. This continues the long-standing policy of parity increases between public and chartered nonpublic schools in Ohio. These funds provide instructional services and secular resources to students and reimburse our schools for some of the costs associated with complying with government mandates.



### College Credit Plus

While we commend Governor Kasich and the General Assembly for their commitment to providing students with the ability to earn college credit through the College Credit Plus program, we have a few concerns with how some of the rules have been interpreted as they pertain to chartered nonpublic schools. Please refer to the testimony of the Ohio Association of Independent Schools for background on this issue.

### End-of-Course Exams

Chartered nonpublic schools are not afraid of testing or accountability, however, we object to the intrusiveness of the 7 end-of-course exams currently required for high school students.

Chartered nonpublic schools follow the Operating Standards for Ohio schools and are held to high levels of accountability by each school's board of directors and parent body. If parents are not happy they will simply take their child and tuition, and leave the school. High school students must complete the required Ohio Core curriculum in addition to passing any mandated exam. In most schools, students also take one or more of the PSAT, SAT, PLAN, or ACT. Overall, our students score above average and nearly every one of them successfully completed all 5 section of the OGT. ODE data shows that a significantly higher percentage of nonpublic school students annually pass all five sections of the OGT, when compared to their public school contemporaries.

We are hopeful that the legislature can strike the necessary balance between allowing nonpublic schools to remain autonomous while still ensuring that graduates receive a high level of academic instruction. This can be achieved by requiring chartered nonpublic schools to administer the ACT to all of their students, rather than the state's end-of-course exams, a measure which the House approved as part of the Education MBR (HB 487) and again nearly unanimously in December as part of HB 343 and Sub SB 96. In addition, following the MBR a study committee to make recommendations on this issue was convened and the Department of Education should be submitting the final recommendation shortly. We urge the House to consider either this recommendation or the aforementioned changes. Both of these recommendations, while somewhat different, address our concerns and would be a positive step in the right direction. I would also note that the House first addressed this issue as a part of HB 193, sponsored by Rep. Brenner, which could be considered as well.

### EdChoice

In theory, "school choice" is available to all Ohioans, except that for most families, when they don't like their assigned public school, they're stuck. They can't afford to move to a different district or pay for a private education. To the parent of the child who is being bullied or who feels their child isn't a good fit in the local public school, it doesn't matter what the district is



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rated on a report card. All that matters to that parent is that their child is not in the most appropriate setting for their learning needs. Continuing to enable parents to make that choice is good for kids, good for districts, and good policy.

While we appreciate Governor Kasich's proposal to raise the scholarship amount for high school students' receiving an EdChoice scholarship from \$5000 to \$5700, we believe that this amount should reflect the foundation funding amount of \$5900 for FY '16 and \$6000 for FY '17. Our funding system in Ohio is, rightfully, focused on funding students and we believe that assigning funding parity to students who wish to attend a different school than their local public school is appropriate. Even so, this would provide substantial cost savings to taxpayers and this amount is still substantially lower than the cost of tuition at most high schools.

Additionally, this same principle should apply to elementary and middle school students as well. While tuition in many K-8 schools are lower than high school, the reality is in many cases the voucher amount is still significantly lower than tuition. The amount of \$4250 that students currently can receive means many schools are substantially subsidizing these students. This is not a sustainable situation and it discourages many high quality providers from participating. If we want to empower parents to ensure that their child gets an education that works best for them, we should allow them to have access to the full per pupil allocation. This change can make a big difference to children at a substantial cost savings to taxpayers.

### **Jon Peterson Scholarship Program (JPSN)**

It is difficult to raise all children and give them the education they need. For parents of children with special needs, this is an even greater challenge. The Jon Peterson Scholarship Program empowers parents of these children. Students with special needs have unique abilities and disabilities, it is therefore crucial to empower parents to custom tailor their child's educational program. Public schools in most cases do a great job, but not all students are the same and this scholarship provides an option to address that fact.

Currently, students with a category 5 or 6 disability have a capped scholarship amount of \$20,000. While this may seem like a lot of money, the cost of educating these children is significant. This is reflected in the proposed amount of state funding for FY '16, \$17,049 and \$25,134 respectively for categories 5 and 6, allocated for traditional public school students with these same impairments, which is in addition to the base per pupil funding amount of \$5900 (besides for federal and other funding streams). For a category 6 student there is a funding amount of approximately \$31,000. Yet a student using a JPSN scholarship would only receive \$20,000. This has created a huge barrier, particularly among low income families, to be able to take advantage of this most important option. The cap should be lifted and students with special needs should be allowed to use the funding that was allocated for them, instead of it being withheld. How would most parents of a child with special needs come up with the

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money to give their child the opportunity they deserve? These funds should go to service this child! It does not make sense to pay \$11,000 to districts for students they are no longer educating. Certainly not in the case of a family dealing with the huge expense and effort that special needs children require and deserve.

Thank you for your consideration. I would be happy to answer your questions or provide additional information.

*Agudath Israel serves as a liaison between government and the entire spectrum of Orthodox Jewish educational institutions including more than 250,000 students attending Jewish nonpublic schools across the country. Rabbi Frank serves on the State Superintendent's nonpublic school advisory committee*

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