

HB 200 Opportunity Scholarship Program
Opponent Testimony
House Education and Career Readiness Committee
June 6, 2017

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Slaby, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the committee, thank you for taking the time to read my testimony today. I received my PhD in Educational Policy Studies in 2005 and have been studying school choice policies for the dozen years since. I currently serve as a professor of education at the University of Cincinnati (though I do not claim to be officially representing the university today). I was raised to support Republican values that are aligned with school choice, including the rights of parents and belief in the free market system. I support school choice; in fact, I currently use a school choice program for my son. But I write today to urge you **not** to support this bill. This is not a good policy for improving school choice options in our state; rather, it invites serious problems.

Replacing our previous voucher programs and expanding them via Opportunity Scholarships (referred to more simply as vouchers here, though I recognize the differences) is problematic for these reasons:

- *Voucher schools have subpar academic performance.* I have no doubt that proponents of this bill will cite studies, typically performed by politically-aligned research foundations, that claim voucher students outperform their public school counterparts. But when we look at peer-reviewed and scientifically rigorous studies, that claim simply does not hold up. At very best the evidence is mixed, but the overall trend shows that public school students outperform voucher students, sometimes markedly so. This is not particularly surprising given that research also shows that private school teachers have less formal training and tend to use outdated curricula and less effective teaching pedagogies. If we want to support parents in choosing alternative schools for their children and to deem them worthy of taxpayer funds, then those schools, teachers, and practices need to be of high quality.
- *These vouchers are not intended to help those in struggling public schools.* We know that the most effective school choice programs are focused on students who otherwise would attend underperforming public schools. HB 200 opens up vouchers to students of any public district, no matter how high-performing it is. While some school choice proponents claim that they intend to rescue poor children from some of the worst public schools, that is certainly not the case with this bill. This approach risks unnecessarily diverting students from our public school system, a situation that is made even more troubling given the overall underperformance of private voucher schools. HB 200 may effectively encourage opting out of higher performing public schools. While this may be the choice of the parents, the academic experiences of the child may suffer as a result.
- *Vouchers do not reflect the will of the people.* As evidenced by the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallop Poll, most citizens do not want vouchers of the sort in HB 200. Only about 1/3 of citizens polled supported the use of vouchers. Additionally, polls show that the more informed about vouchers a citizen is, the more likely they are to oppose their use. Please keep your constituents in mind when deciding on this bill. Many prefer better alternatives to school choice, especially those who are most informed about school choice policies, including myself.

- *Voucher schools exacerbate school segregation.* Private schools supported by vouchers have a long history of contributing to racial and economic segregation. This is in part due to parental choice, where parents seek out schools that reflect their own demographics, and sometimes White parents overtly have used vouchers to escape increasingly diverse public schools. But those choices, as documented by University of Indiana Professor Christopher Lubienski, are worsened by private schools using marketing and enrollment approaches that exacerbate parents' choices of segregation. To prepare for the workforce and to truly fulfill *e pluribus unum*, we need integrated schools where our children interact with those different from themselves. HB 200 does nothing to head off this problem.
- *Vouchers are sometimes used to access even more expensive and elite private schools.* Research shows that families use vouchers in addition to funds they have to access more elite private schools. Removing the EdChoice provision that tuition may not exceed the amount of the voucher will open the door for this problem in Ohio. Setting a means test of 400% is hardly low enough to control for this. Consider the situation in Chile where non-means tested vouchers led to wealthier families purchasing increasingly exclusive education for their children, which led to well-funded private schools depleting other schools of teachers and resources, leaving the poorest children behind in crumbling schools that operated only on the value of the voucher without additional funding from parents. Riots followed in the streets until changes were made to improve their system. Let's avoid that scenario in Ohio.
- *Failing voucher schools do not close and are propped up by taxpayer funds.* Researchers have found that many underperforming voucher schools fail to close, as would have been predicted under market logic, due to lack of demand. Rather, many parents stayed put in these schools, thereby demonstrating that competition and markets are not failsafes for ensuring good schooling. The current bill does not sufficiently address how to handle vouchers being sent to chronically low performing private schools.
- *Voucher schools can teach undemocratic goals, such as intolerance and inequity.* I grew up in a fundamentalist Christian family and continue to uphold religion as important to me and the rearing of my child. But, that personal position needs to be separated from tax-supported democratic institutions. Some religious schools not only discriminate against people of particular sexualities and teach that one gender is superior to another, but also fail to teach tolerance and interaction across religious and ideological differences, a key responsibility of public schools that prepare children for citizenship and work in a country that celebrates diversity and freedom of opinion and worship. This bill allows funds to be directed to religious schools, including extremist versions that may outright teach anti-Americanism or anti-democratic beliefs. That said, the state should not be in the business of trying to differentiate which religious schools are aligned with the principles of democracy.
- *Vouchers reduce accountability.* Even with the testing provision in this bill, shifting students to private and religious schools that have fewer regulations, jeopardizes our ability to maintain accountability for the content and quality of education those children receive and the ability of the public to oversee how funds are spent. Finally, voucher schools supported by this bill are not required to have an elected school board. School choice bills should expand the voice and participation of citizens, not narrow them.

Let us not conflate these Opportunity Scholarships with school choice as a whole. School choice can take many other useful forms expressed through better legislation. Let us promote good choices, not all choices.

Please vote NO on HB 200.

Respectfully,

Dr. Sarah Stitzlein

The research behind these claims is detailed in Sarah Stitzlein, *American Public Education and the Responsibility of its Citizens: Supporting Democracy in an Age of Accountability* (Oxford University Press, 2017).