



Proponent Testimony

House Bill 200: Opportunity Scholarship Program

Presented by School Choice Ohio

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Chairman Brenner, Vice-Chair Slaby, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the House Education and Career Readiness Committee, my name is Kaleigh Lemaster, and I am the executive director of School Choice Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today in support of House Bill 200.

School Choice Ohio is the only statewide organization that informs families of 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 child, whether it is a traditional public school, private school, charter school, virtual school, or homeschooling.

At the beginning of May, our organization proudly stood alongside more than 1,500 parents, students, school leaders and advocates on the Statehouse lawn for the School Choice Rally celebrating school choice in Ohio and the opportunities it provides families in our state.

SCO provides outreach to families on Ohio's five state scholarship programs – the Cleveland Scholarship & Tutoring Program, EdChoice Scholarship Program, Income-Based (EdChoice Expansion) Scholarship Program, Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship Program, and Autism Scholarship Program. These programs are helping thousands of students across Ohio attend the learning environment that is the best fit for their needs.

Today I stand before you in support of House Bill 200. The bill proposes the consolidation of three existing scholarship programs – EdChoice, Income-Based (EdChoice Expansion) and the Cleveland Scholarship & Tutoring Program—into one statewide, means-tested program available for any student in grades K-12 whose family income is at or below 400 percent of federal poverty guidelines to be used toward tuition and fees at the participating private school of their choice.

The existing scholarship programs that are combined under this bill have helped thousands of students attend the private school of their choice. They are popular options that yield many success stories of children thriving in their new learning environment. House Bill 200 improves

on these programs and further strengthens school choice in our state by creating one uniform, easier-to-navigate scholarship program. This bill proposes a number of changes that will help more Ohio families access the best learning environment for their child's needs. I would like to highlight those changes for you today.

## **Eligibility**

Our organization communicates directly with families. We reach out to them to inform them of their education options, and they also reach out to us to learn more about the options that interest them and their children. These families are looking for a different learning environment for any number of reasons, like safety concerns, class sizes, curriculum, and so on. The reasons are as unique as the children themselves.

Now, imagine the disappointment for these parents when we have to tell them their income is above the cutoff by just a few dollars or that their child will always be one grade above the phased-in eligibility for the Income-Based program or that their school is not on the EdChoice eligible schools list this year, so they are not eligible to apply.

House Bill 200 allows eligibility up to 400% of federal poverty guidelines and is available to students in grades K-12. This will help make determining eligibility simpler for families by providing one easy-to-understand set of criteria, and it will allow more of Ohio's low-and-middle-income families who are looking for a different learning environment to participate.

I have seen and heard the devastation firsthand when a family finds out they are not currently eligible for a scholarship. The Ohio Opportunity Scholarship Program would give our state's families who are most in need of this opportunity the chance to access a school they would otherwise not be able to afford.

## **Application Process**

Our organization also helps families navigate the application process for Ohio's scholarship programs. House Bill 200 proposes a couple of improvements that will make this process easier for families.

First, it includes an expanded application window. Families are also given the opportunity to apply for a scholarship for use in the current school year. Not only will this extend the windows of opportunity for families, but it will also allow families to send their child to a school that is a better fit sooner, as opposed to having their child finish out the year in a school that does not fit his or her learning needs. For families dealing with something like bullying, this means everything.

House Bill 200 also makes a change to the application process. Currently, families must first apply to the participating private school of their choice. Once their child is accepted, they work with the private school to complete the application for the scholarship, and the private school

submits it on their behalf. Often times, families are not informed about whether their child will receive a scholarship until late in the summer, and even sometimes after the start of the school year. House Bill 200 will allow parents to apply directly to the department for a certificate of scholarship approval. Families will know within 30 days if they will receive a scholarship and how much their scholarship will be worth.

## **Funding**

Ohio's EdChoice Scholarship Program is funded through deductions of state dollars from public school districts, the Income-Based Scholarship Program is funded through a line-item, and the Cleveland Scholarship Program is funded through both a line-item and district deduct. House Bill 200 shifts to a uniform funding mechanism that directly funds scholarships. For parents, moving away from line-item funding is ideal. It is very concerning to families to know that the funding for their child's scholarship program could disappear with the stroke of a pen.

## **Accountability**

Ohio's scholarship programs have a number of accountability mechanisms in place. Participating schools must go through the rigorous process of becoming chartered by the department. They are also subject to audits by the department. In addition, scholarship recipients take state assessments, and those results are posted on the department's website in parent-friendly one-pagers with data for each participating private school.

House Bill 200 takes it even one step further to add a new measure of accountability. The bill includes a requirement for the state to calculate value added data for the voucher program. This information will be made available for parents who are doing their research to find a quality school that fits their child's needs. This is important because well-informed families can make the best choice for their child.

These programs also have the ultimate accountability in that the schools are accountable directly to the parents. If parents do not believe their child is receiving a quality education, they can leave that school and find another that is a better fit.

## **Scholarship Amounts**

Under House Bill 200, scholarship awards are worth up to \$5,000 for grades K-8 and up to \$7,500 for high school students. A student whose family income falls between 200 and 400 percent of federal poverty guidelines will receive an adjusted amount based on his or her family's specific income.

The bill allows schools to offer volunteer opportunities for families to offset any remaining tuition, which is a great option for many families, but for those parents who are already working two or three jobs in some cases, it can be tough. For those families, the Education Savings Account component of the legislation is important.

House Bill 200 will allow families who are awarded a scholarship to place any funds remaining after paying tuition and fees at their participating private school into an Education Savings Account. These funds could be used toward a number of future expenses, including to pay the difference between the scholarship amount and tuition in future years.

### **Conclusion**

House Bill 200 presents an opportunity for thousands of families across the state to access scholarship opportunities for their children who are not seeing their needs met in their assigned school. The reality is that public schools are a great fit for the majority of children, myself included. But for those children who need a different learning environment to reach their full academic potential, a scholarship program like the Opportunity Scholarship Program proposed in House Bill 200 can be a lifeline.

School Choice Ohio firmly believes that all children deserve a quality education in the learning environment that best fits their needs, and House Bill 200 will empower families in their pursuit of quality education options.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 200. At this time I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have.