

Testimony of Adam Peshek  
HB 200 Opportunity Scholarship Program  
House Education and Career Readiness Committee  
November 14, 2017

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Slaby, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the committee, thank you for your time today addressing this important topic.

My name is Adam Peshek, and I direct education choice policy at the Foundation for Excellence in Education. We are a national, bipartisan nonprofit organization that advocates for policies that help students maximize their potential.

### **Choice Helps Families Find the Right Fit**

We support education choice policies in all forms: open-enrollment public schools, private school choice, charter schools, magnet schools, etc. We believe that education is too complicated and important to assume that one school will be the right fit for each child based simply on the fact that the child is zoned to attend there.

As we know, each school has its own unique culture, different teachers and administrators, different teaching styles, different curriculum, and many other features that vary from school to school. There is not necessarily a “right” or “wrong” way of doing things. For instance, we can debate whether or not introducing tablets and laptops in classrooms is better or worse than traditional textbooks. We can debate if schools should require uniforms, assign a certain book, or embrace classical, progressive, or Montessori styles of teaching. I can even show you data that shows 90% of students respond well to this or that – which is great, *as long as you’re not a student in the other 10%*.

Choice promotes individuals over averages. What works for one child may not work for another child. I am one of five children, who attended four different high schools without ever moving. I am sure most of you have had similar experiences among friends and family.

Education choice provides families the means to have their child in a school that works for them, without forcing those practices on other students.

At its core, choice is about finding the right environment to fit your unique circumstances.

### **The Benefits of a Streamlined Program**

That is why moving to a simpler, income-based eligibility structure is an improvement over a system that sets eligibility on district school performance.

Most private education choice programs across the country base eligibility on family income or student disability status – very few base eligibility on the performance of a student’s geographically assigned district school. There are 21 programs that base eligibility on family income and only 5 that require students to attend or be zoned for a low-performing public school.

The purpose of choice programs is to provide families with the means to attend a private school. Why should a wealthy family zoned for a D-rated public school be eligible for this program but not a low-income student falling behind academically in a B-rated school? Wealthy families are better positioned to pay for private school or, more often, afford the higher housing costs that are so often tied to school performance.

By contrast, the funding system in the proposal before you is as progressive as you can find: students with greater need receive the most funding, with state assistance declining as a student's family income increases.

The proposal also modestly increases scholarship amounts to \$5,000 for students in grades K-8 and \$7,500 for students in grades 9-12, instead of different funding levels for different students in different parts of the state.

These increases, while still substantially less than the per-pupil amount in district and charter schools, will nevertheless provide even more options for students – particularly in high school.

All of this – consolidated programs, streamlined eligibility, and more equitable funding – make for a much simpler program for families to navigate. Instead of having one set of eligibility for some students in some parts of the state, it will now be much easier to explain to parents the options they have, based entirely on their income.

### **Empirical Research on Private Education Choice in the U.S.**

There is a large body of research looking at the effect of private choice programs on participants, students who remain in public schools, and taxpayers. The design of the research matters. When available, you want to look at random assignment studies – the gold standard in social science research. The second-best research design is matching longitudinal studies, which compare similar students over time. The last resort is to use control variables to observe students at one point in time.

The body of evidence for private choice is fairly clear, these programs provide a modest benefit to students, provide no evidence of harming students who remain in public schools, and are effective at promoting non-academic aims like a civic values and racial integration:

- Twenty studies have examined scholarship participants' academic outcomes using the gold standard method of random assignment. Of these, 14 find that the program positively improves student outcomes, four find no visible effect between the students' performance at their former public school and their current private school, and two studies found a negative impact on student performance. (14-4-2)
- Twenty-six studies have examined the effect that choice programs have had on the affected public schools, using the silver standard method of longitudinal matching. Of these, 25 find that the choice program led to improvements in public schools, one finds no visible effect, and no study finds a negative effect. (25-0-1)

- Ten studies have examined the effect school choice programs have had on the racial composition of schools. Of these, nine found that the programs move students from more racially-segregated schools to less segregated schools and no study found that choice increases racial segregation. This makes sense intuitively, since these programs often benefit disadvantaged children and provide them the opportunity that more advantaged children already have (9-1-0)
- Thirty-six studies examined the effect that choice programs have had on civic values, like civic knowledge and respect for the rights of others in society. Of those, 18 find positive effects for private schools, 17 find no difference between public and private, and only one study found a negative effect of private school civic values. (18-17-1)

Many other descriptive studies have found positive results for student graduation rates, college attendance rates, and lower incidents of encounters with law enforcement.

Is the research “settled?” No, the purpose of research is to continuously study and produce the results. But, to put it into perspective: studies utilizing a gold standard randomized control method that look at student test scores, school choice programs have a larger body of positive effects demonstrated than class size reduction, pre-K programs, and professional development combined.

### **Conclusion**

Every child deserves an education that prepares them for a successful and fulfilling life. To fulfill this goal, parents need to be empowered to choose an education that meets the unique needs of their children.

For the vast majority of families, the school of choice will be their traditional district-run public school. That is something Ohio should be proud of. In fact, many families choose where they live specifically for the quality of the particular public schools in the area.

But to say the system works well for most is not enough. The proposal before you makes important changes to your education choice environment, which will ultimately benefit students and families.

Sincerely,

Adam Peshek