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Proponent/HB 200
House Education and Career Readiness Committee
November 28, 2017

Good afternoon Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Slaby, Ranking Member Fedor and Committee Members. My name is Sharla Elton. I am the Superintendent and Principal of Heritage Christian School.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the importance of the School Choice scholarship programs in Ohio, particularly the EdChoice Program and House Bill 200.

Heritage Christian School is approaching our 50th year anniversary in Canton, Ohio. But in many ways, we are a new school with a long history. Over the decades, when many families in Canton moved to the suburbs in search of better economic prosperity, and better scoring public schools, many students in need remained right in Canton.

As a school, we were faced with a decision. Do we move to the suburbs too? Or do we change to meet the needs of students right where we are? We have made our decision, and are 100% passionate and dedicated to our children, our community, and our mission right in urban Canton, Ohio.

Please allow me to share some statistics with you. A recent Canton Repository article referenced Stark County as having a trend of becoming “smaller, older, and poorer.” But, this trend is not evenly distributed among the County.

According to the Census Bureau, in the City of Canton, where Heritage is located, the median household income is \$29,418. Just miles north in the City of North Canton, the median household income is over \$52,000. In fact, the per capita income in North Canton is nearly equal to the entire household income in Canton City. As a comparison, the overall Ohio median household income is over \$51,000.

Using Census Bureau information, in Stark County as a whole, the percentage of people in poverty is 13.4%. However, in Canton City, the percentage is 32.3% - one of every three people. In other areas of Stark County, the percentage is less than 7%.

Individuals of minority races are also not distributed evenly throughout the County. The percentage of African-Americans, individuals of two or more races, and those of Hispanic or Latino ancestry is doubled in Canton City compared to the Stark County average. In some areas of the County, minority races comprise less than four percent of the population. Despite having 29,000 African-American individuals in Stark County, only 660 African-American men hold a Bachelor’s Degree. The educational system must do better.

We know that education and economics are often related, and the case is the same in Canton City. As the public school is failing, parents who have the means and awareness are more likely

to move to a more successful district, thus leaving the neighborhoods at more of a deficit. I share this information because I want you to understand our children, and our families. I want you to forget about many of the assumptions you have about private schools when I tell you about Heritage.

At Heritage Christian School, we have about 350 children from Preschool age three through high school grade 12 in one building. Over the past five years, our student enrollment has grown nearly 23%. Our school does not have a problem with having enough demand for our school, although we do have extra capacity at the older grade levels where scholarships are not available. Rather, our families struggle with access. We simply don't have enough school financial assistance to meet the need. When we tell our neighbors about the EdChoice scholarships and School Choice options, they get very excited!

Nearly 78% of our students attend using the Ohio EdChoice District-Based and EdChoice Expansion Scholarship programs. Heritage's free and reduced lunch rate is 73%, higher than some of the public schools in our county. All students at Heritage receive a free breakfast every morning.

Heritage has a vibrant student body, where students are admitted regardless of their family religion or lack thereof. Our students come from every kind of background, from homes with strong support, and homes with no support.

We love our beautifully diverse children. About half of our students are African-American or one or more minority races, and about 7% identify as Hispanic or Latino. We are thrilled that families that are often considered academically disenfranchised, culturally diverse, and/or economically disadvantaged feel welcome at Heritage Christian School.

While there are many challenges in our community, and in Ohio as a whole, I believe School Choice is a solution. Students in every area of Stark County, and in Ohio, should have access to a successful education. Heritage is an example of School Choice success.

With the same student population as the failing schools mere blocks away, Heritage students are succeeding. Our students take the state tests. Although we aren't issued a report card, we can compare apples to apples.

When we stack our students' test results from grade three through high school against the public districts where data is available, Heritage outperforms 9 of the 13 districts and ties one in Total State Indicators met.

When looking at the scores, it is easy to see that the longer children attend Heritage, the better they score compared to the public school districts. Heritage high school students outscored four districts in every single test where data is available, and Heritage outscored in the majority of tests for seven districts. The only two remaining districts (Jackson and North Canton) were a tie at that level. It is worth noting that neither of these highest performing public school districts offer open enrollment to families who want a better public education for their children. But

through EdChoice, Heritage is going toe-to-toe with the wealthy, elite districts in our County, and doing so with children that society has too often written off.

Similar successes can be seen at the middle school level. For elementary grades, Heritage students scored higher in comparison to Stark County public schools in 28 testing areas, with an additional five scores as a tie.

In our home City of Canton, there is no comparison. Heritage students outperform in 20 of the 22 indicators, and ties in one. We bring students from underachieving districts to higher levels of learning.

In addition to outperforming local public and charter schools, Heritage students also score better than other private schools locally. All EdChoice Scholarship students in the State of Ohio are tested in grades three through eight for proficiency in reading and math. According to the most recent results, Heritage students beat the overall Ohio average for all scholarship students in the state. Heritage students also outperformed every other local private school where data was available, even the ones serving much more affluent families.

Please don't perceive this as a criticism against public education, or other private schools – it is far from it. On the contrary, it shows the success all students can achieve through the School Choice programs. Simply stated, different environments can serve children differently. Each child deserves a learning environment that best suits his or her needs. There have been children who were not successful at Heritage that found success in other schools, likewise, children who were unsuccessful in other schools were able to succeed in our school.

As an example, we have a senior this year who is a twin. Using EdChoice, Bryan attends Heritage Christian School, while his twin brother chose a local Catholic High School with the scholarship. This is proof that even twins can have different needs and seek learning environments that are perfect for each student as a unique individual.

I want every child in Ohio to succeed. With having a business background, I believe that open competition is good for consumers – in this case, families and children. Increased choice means that everyone must raise their standards in order to compete for students. That means we do a better job of educating children, for a lower cost to the taxpayer.

Heritage's high school graduation rate is 100% nearly every year, and 87% of our students in last year's graduating class planned to attend college. And this is just academics – I could talk to you for hours about our mentoring programs, our character-development initiatives, and how every Heritage Christian School student in grades six through 12 volunteers in the community to learn how to give back. We believe that if we re-build children, they will re-build the community themselves.

We are achieving uncommon success at half to one-third of the cost of a public or charter school reimbursement. Financially, this is our greatest challenge. Our families are unable to help our school financially. House Bill 200 will also help schools like Heritage with sustainability, to ensure the continuation of our great work. As a taxpayer, the bill also makes financial sense.

Heritage is outperforming the school district where I reside, yet I'm paying more for that product. This bill allows equity.

My request to you today is very simple. Allow us to serve more children. Every year, there are families that are broken apart because a younger child qualifies, and an older child does not. Our financial aid ability is not nearly capable to allow everyone free access, although that is what our families need.

It is time to allow more access, especially in communities like ours where there are no other financial options. Please allow families to choose the best schools for their children by supporting House Bill 200. I promise that if you will give families the keys, schools like Heritage will give their children the Kingdom of education.

Chair Brenner, Vice-Chair Slaby, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the House Education and Career Readiness Committee, thank you for taking the time to listen to my testimony. I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have.