



Interested Party Testimony
House Bill 49: Main Operating Budget FY 2018-2019
Presented by School Choice Ohio
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Chairman Cupp, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, my name is Kaleigh Lemaster, and I am the Executive Director of School Choice Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on House Bill 49.

School Choice Ohio (SCO) is the only statewide organization that educates parents on 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 children – whether it's traditional public school, private school, or charter school, or through virtual or blended learning or homeschooling.

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

House Bill 49 continues support for these scholarship programs and proposes some improvements. In addition to highlighting those areas, I would also like to share some recommendations for your consideration.

Cleveland Scholarship & Tutoring Program

Created in 1995, the Cleveland Scholarship & Tutoring Program is the second-oldest scholarship program in the nation. Any child who resides within the boundaries of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District is eligible to apply for a scholarship to be used toward tuition at the participating private school of their choice. Scholarship amounts for this program are \$4,250 for students in grades K-8 and \$5,700 for high school students.

The scholarship amounts for this program are lower than the scholarship amounts for the EdChoice Scholarship Program. The EdChoice program, which was created in 2005, provides scholarships for students who are assigned to attend the state's underperforming public schools. These scholarships are also to be used toward tuition at the participating private school of their

choice. It is the state's largest scholarship program, serving more than 20,000 students. Scholarship amounts for the EdChoice program are \$4,650 for students in grades K-8 and \$6,000 for high school students.

SCO recommends that the Cleveland Scholarship amounts be increased to \$4,650 for grades K-8 and \$6,000 for high school to give parity to students in these scholarship programs.

Income-Based (EdChoice Expansion) Scholarship Program

Ohio's Income-Based Scholarship Program, also known as EdChoice Expansion, was created in 2013. Students whose family income is at or below 200 percent of federal poverty guidelines are eligible to apply for this scholarship to be used toward tuition at the participating private school of their choice. The demand for this program is high. In fact, it was oversubscribed last year.

The program, funded through a line-item appropriation, is being phased-in with the addition of one grade each year. Students entering grades K-3 were eligible to apply for the 2016-17 school year. SCO supports the continued phase-in of this program as proposed by House Bill 49, which adds fourth grade in the 2017-18 school year and fifth grade in the 2018-19 school year.

Another provision in House Bill 49 impacting this program is a change to the application periods held by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE). Currently, statute requires two application windows for the program. The first opens on February 1, and the second opens on July 1.

House Bill 49 includes language that permits ODE to cancel the second window if all the program's funds are expended through awarded scholarships in the first window. Ideally, SCO would like to see enough funding for this program to award all eligible students who apply in both application windows. Thousands of Ohio families are counting on this scholarship to provide their child with a quality education that meets his or her needs. We should not deny them that opportunity.

However, as proposed in House Bill 49, it is not clear as to when ODE will determine that the program's appropriation is spent. Because of this, SCO recommends adding a specific deadline for ODE to process applications and make this determination. Our recommendation is May 31. Using this year's application deadline of April 30 as an example, a deadline of May 31 would provide the department, which can begin processing applications as they are submitted, one month to complete this process. Including a deadline will allow families to better plan and prepare when choosing their child's learning environment.

If a date cannot be provided by which the department can make this determination, the second window should take place in case there are remaining scholarships available.

EdChoice Scholarship Program

As I mentioned previously, Ohio's EdChoice Scholarship was created in 2005 and offers scholarships to students assigned to the state's underperforming public schools. The scholarships are to be used toward tuition at the participating private school of the family's choice.

Every year, ODE publishes a list of designated public schools whose students are eligible to apply for the scholarship. However, Ohio's safe harbor provision prohibits using state testing data for the 2014-15, 2015-16, or 2016-17 school years for EdChoice eligibility. Despite initial assurances that safe harbor would only last for two years, it was extended in the last budget and continues to prevent the department from updating the EdChoice eligibility list. No new schools will be added and no schools will be removed until the 2019-20 school year.

Ideally, Ohio would move away from the performance-based model for the EdChoice Scholarship and move to a means-tested program that gives low and middle-income families the opportunity to choose a different school for their child. This student-centric approach would empower families with the ability to choose the school that is best for their child and remove the fluctuating eligibility we currently have in place. If we continue to follow the performance-based model, it is critical that we allow the program to work in the way it was intended and remove EdChoice eligibility as a sanction under safe harbor.

Conclusion

House Bill 49 provides important support to Ohio's scholarship programs, and the recommendations provided by our organization would further strengthen those programs. Ohio is fortunate to have a variety of quality education options, and it is important that families in all zip codes and of all income levels be empowered to choose the best learning environment to meet the unique needs of their children. School Choice Ohio looks forward to working with you throughout the budget process to ensure that Ohio families continue to be empowered by educational choice.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 49. I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have.