



**Agudath
Israel
of America**
אגודת ישראל באמריקה

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Rabbi Yitz Frank
Ohio Director

House Finance Committee
K-12 Education Subcommittee
Agudath Israel of America (Ohio)
Rabbi Eric "Yitz" Frank, Ohio Director

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Chairman Cupp, Ranking Member Miller, and esteemed members of the committee, we greatly appreciate your service and your invitation to testify today. Ohio's biennial budget, as proposed in House Bill 49, has a number of positive provisions. We also have some suggestions for improvement. I make my comments today as a representative of schools in the Jewish community, as well as in the broader context of recognizing that Ohio has made a historical commitment to families in the context of K-12 education. In this testimony, I am also representing several other school associations, in my capacity as vice-president of the Ohio Council of American Private Education.

Ohio has historically invested in strengthening the education provided by chartered nonpublic schools. Separately, but importantly, we have invested in affording families the ability to choose the school of their choice. There are close to 2 million students in the state of Ohio. Most of them attend traditional public schools. Within that group, some attend magnet, vocational, or other types of specialized or selective public schools. Other students attend public community schools or e-schools, and about 10% of students attend nonpublic schools. In addition, there are also a significant number of families that choose to home school their children.

Auxiliary Services and Administrative Cost Reimbursement

Two of the ways that Ohio supports chartered nonpublic school students is through the Auxiliary Services Fund and through the Administrative Cost Reimbursement. We appreciate the continued funding for auxiliary services and administrative cost reimbursement for students in chartered nonpublic schools. These funds provide instructional services and secular resources to students and reimburse our schools for some of the costs associated with complying with government mandates. In the proposed budget, the governor has not increased the funding for these important line items, and he has proposed a cap for per pupil expenditures. This may be worth revisiting by the General Assembly.

In addition, we propose two changes to the auxiliary services component. We propose amending the allowable services to include security personnel. As you may know, the Jewish community and Jewish day schools have been on a high level of alert due to recent threats. Allowing security personnel to be included under the allowable services, even absent a funding increase, will be a step in the right direction. In addition, current law allows districts to determine whether to provide direct services to nonpublic schools, or to contract with third party providers. We would recommend changing this policy and leaving this to the discretion of the nonpublic school. In addition to lowering costs, and thereby increasing the amount of services the state can provide, the quality of personnel and service will be increased through the involvement of additional providers.

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Additionally, we would question the introduction of a cap to the Administrative Cost Reimbursement. As a reimbursement, by definition there should not be a cap. Obviously there would be an artificial cap imposed by the appropriation itself. However, we see no need for a cap beyond what the appropriation would allow.

College Credit Plus

In the last biennial budget, a measure was included to give deference to chartered nonpublic schools about whether or not to participate in College Credit Plus. Governor Kasich line-item vetoed this measure. While we are supportive of the program, and generally speaking, have not seen our prior concerns realized, we would continue to urge the General Assembly to give deference to private schools about whether or not to participate in this program.

Testing

On the topic of testing for students using state scholarships, and more generally, for high school students, we are not proposing any changes at this time to Ohio's testing system. While we continue to object to the notion that the state should second guess the graduation criteria for schools that are chosen by parents and students, we only ask that the state be willing to extend certain concessions to chartered nonpublic schools. I would be happy to elaborate on this.

Jon Peterson Scholarship Program

It is difficult to raise all children and give them the education they need. For parents of children with special needs, that is even a greater challenge. The Jon Peterson Scholarship Program empowers parents of these children. Students with special needs have unique abilities, it is therefore crucial to empower parents to custom tailor their child's educational program. Public schools in most cases do a great job, but not all students are the same and this scholarship provides an option to address that fact.

We have a number of proposals to amend this important program. Primarily, there are several aspects of the Autism Scholarship Program that parents and students appreciate, which we would like extended to the Jon Peterson Special Needs Program. These include: allowing rolling admission, allowing exemptions from testing, including students to participate from the age of 3, and several other important amendments. I would be happy to discuss these and additional proposals with members.

EdChoice

In theory, "school choice" is available to all Ohioans, except that for most families, when they don't like their assigned public school, they're stuck. They can't afford to move to a different district or pay for a private education. To the parent of the child who is being bullied or who feels their child isn't a good fit in the local public school, it doesn't matter what the district is rated on a report card. All that matters to that parent is that their child is not in the most appropriate setting for their learning needs.

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Continuing to enable parents to make that choice is good for kids and good policy. Governor Kasich's proposed continuation of the "phase-in" of the EdChoice Expansion Scholarship is most welcome.

Last General Assembly, this body supported and enacted important steps to strengthen this program. These steps to increase the scholarship amount were long overdue and increased support for families' choices and increased school participation. In fact, this, in part, resulted in the EdChoice Expansion (income based) Program being oversubscribed. We greatly appreciate the hard work of the Ohio Department of Education to accommodate these families.

However, the current model of school choice is at a crossroads. Our flagship school choice program, the EdChoice Scholarship, is based on the "low performing schools" model. While this program has undoubtedly increased choices for families, and, as intended, raised the level of academic performance in impacted public school buildings, we are undermining it. "Safe harbor" provisions that specifically list EdChoice as a sanction, which public schools are "held harmless" from (originally enacted in HB 387 in the 130th GA and continued for two additional years in HB 64 of the 131st GA) undermine families' options.

Ohio has long supported school choice, including private school choice. The "safe harbor" provisions directly limit the families in an estimated 860 schools that would, absent of "safe harbor," be afforded the opportunity to access the EdChoice program. This has had the effect of freezing the pool of eligible students since the advent of this change. No one is forcing parents to leave, and the vast majority will not. But we ought not to stand in their way if that is their desire. This poor policy must be reconsidered. There is nothing "safe" about this.

While it is not the subject to discuss today, there is a proposal in the Senate (SB 85) that proposes to shift Ohio's school choice programs to a means tested model. We support this change. If the General Assembly prefers to stick with the current model, which does have some advantages, we must allow it to work. We should remove, retroactively, "safe harbor" provisions. While we recognize that academic performance is not the sole measure of a school, we also strongly believe that parents should be the ones to decide that. If we choose not to remove "safe harbor," we should strongly consider shifting to an entirely means based mechanism, as the Senate is considering.

We thank you for your time and would be happy to answer any follow up questions.

Agudath Israel serves as a liaison between government and the entire spectrum of Orthodox Jewish educational institutions including more than 250,000 students attending Jewish nonpublic schools across the country. Rabbi Frank serves on the State Superintendent's nonpublic school advisory committee

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