

**Senator Matt Huffman**

**12th District**

**Senate Education Committee**

**March 22, 2017**

**Senate Bill 85 – Sponsor Testimony**

Chairwoman Lehner, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on Senate Bill 85. I appreciate your consideration of this important legislation.

Programs exist today such as District Open Enrollment, EdChoice Scholarships, and the Cleveland Tutoring and Scholarship Program to assist parents in finding the right fit for their student, but these options are based on limited geography, a “failing schools model,” and a limited income based model. In order to assist parents and students, S.B. 85 would fund a newly created, income-based opportunity scholarship program for students in Ohio to attend a chartered non-public school of their choice.

The legislation would create a separately funded, income-based, scholarship program to offset the cost of attending a chartered non-public school targeted for families with a combined income of up to 200% Federal Poverty Level (FPL). For reference, for a family of four, the 2016 FPL is $48,600. Scholarships would range in value with a maximum scholarship of $5,000 for grades K-8, and $7,500 for grades 9-12. Students with families of incomes above 200% FPL up to 400% are eligible to receive partial scholarships on a sliding scale.

Proximity to family, child care, housing, access to transportation, employment, and affordability are all factors in where a family decides to live. By basing this scholarship on income, and funding it separately, the bill removes the current “failing schools” model as well as the “district deduct,” both of which cause confusion and affect districts in radically different ways. In addition, the accessibility of this scholarship will reduce the incentive for families to move away from their neighborhoods in search of other school options.

In order to assist these parents and students, S.B. 85 combines the three “choice” voucher programs (Cleveland, EdChoice “failing schools” & EdChoice Expansion) into one, creating the Ohio Opportunity Scholarship program which establishes a new, separately funded, income-based scholarship program for students in Ohio to attend a chartered non-public (private) school of their choice. By removing the “deduct” funding method, combining the three programs into one, and grandfathering in existing voucher students, the bill streamlines the process and eligibility criteria, opening doors for more families and making it easier for disadvantaged students to participate.

S.B. 85 ensures that the middle class has access to choice, by increasing their options within their current neighborhoods. The majority of the current programs do not provide this incentive. Under the proposed income guidelines, middle class families (firefighters, teachers, nurses, police officers, construction workers…) will be able to access a private school for their children where they live today- if they choose.

We know and expect the vast majority of students will remain in traditional public schools. This is a good thing. However, ensuring that families have more choices, especially to attend private schools with successful track records, improves academic outcomes both for scholarship recipients and for area public schools. Empirical data tells us this, but it is also common sense.

In order to ensure parents have a strong sense of a school’s academic track record, the bill includes an additional accountability component requiring that the state calculate a value-added score (VAM) for scholarship students, which are already by law required to take the state tests. This will allow parents to have more information as they search out educational opportunities for their children. We know parents choose schools for many reasons, and the goal is not to second guess, but provide them more information will help them in their choice.

In addition, the bill empowers families through an Educational Savings Account (ESA) which allows families to save any additional money beyond the cost of tuition in an account held by the state for future educational costs. ESA funds can be used for education expenses such as high school tuition (which is often higher than K-8), tutoring, and even towards higher education within the state of Ohio. All of the money saved through the ESA will stay in Ohio. ESAs allow families to make cost conscious decisions regarding tuition and to save for the future, something they may not be able to do today.

For those that support the inherent concept of “school choice,” that parents should be able to choose the best option for their child, this bill is a step in the right direction. For those that do not subscribe to that notion, regardless of their motivation, they should still support this bill in comparison to Ohio’s current school choice programs.

The bottom line is: this is a good deal for taxpayers, it is the right thing for families and communities, and through the ESA component we will be able to introduce an incentive to parents to keep tuition low. By expanding educational opportunities through the Ohio Opportunity Scholarship for students, we will ensure that we are training and educating the next generation of Ohio taxpayers regardless of their family’s income.

Thank you for your time and consideration of Senate Bill 85. I am happy to take questions at this time.