

Audra Juarez
Proponent/SB 85 EdChoice Changed our Lives
Senate Education Committee
April 25, 2017

Good afternoon Chairwoman Lehner, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking member Sykes and Committee Members. My name is Audra Juarez. I'd like to share our story how school choice and the EdChoice Scholarship Program specifically has made a difference for my children.

I come from a small farm town right outside of Indian Lake, Ohio. Growing up in rural Ohio we only had one choice in the school that we could attend. Although open enrollment was available in certain circumstances, I was not familiar what was happening in larger districts like Columbus. After high school I attended the Ohio State University for my undergraduate before marrying and starting my family in Columbus Ohio. Once my husband and I started our family we did begin to think about what area we might like to live. I wasn't quite aware of all the different options; lottery schools, charter schools, public and private. When our third child was born our oldest was ready to go off to kindergarten. We enrolled him in a charter school near our home because the public school was failing. I was just starting to understand what it meant to be in a failing school district. At this time I didn't know about the EdChoice Scholarship Program even though I was an educator myself.

My oldest continued at the charter school until we moved back to my hometown for a short stint while trying to sell our home. Upon returning to Columbus I was hired by the Catholic Diocese. I enrolled my son in the small private Catholic school where I would be teaching. Not only did the school offer Catholic values it also provided a smaller environment for my son to thrive. We paid tuition for my son. It wasn't easy but we felt it was important for his future. I was so happy to have a new home for him where I could see him completing the next six years. Not long after enrolling in the private school, the charter school my son had previously attended was shut down in the middle of the school year after changing from two different locations in just two years. I was relieved that we were no longer there and not among the displaced families.

Before my son moved into his junior high years, the public school where he would have attended as his home elementary school closed as well. The importance of staying in the private sector became more relevant with our growing family.

While teaching at a private school I started to learn about the EdChoice program and its benefits. I found out that my son would not benefit from the program as he was already enrolled in a private school. I made sure to keep myself knowledgeable as my other son would be entering kindergarten in only a year. I knew that without the help of the state funded program, we may not be able to afford to continue in the private school. We applied for the EdChoice and received funding that year and every subsequent year. He is now an 8th grader and has benefited from nine years of private school education. I feel his journey has been priceless and I am ever grateful to the scholarship program that has allowed him to attend schools that we would never have been able to afford. He is now accepted into private Catholic high school where he will attend next year. My daughter, only two years younger than him, has also benefited from The EdChoice program. She is currently a sixth grader in a private Catholic school.

I am grateful for where my children are at this moment because of the EdChoice Scholarship Program. I can only imagine having bounced around different schools in Columbus that are failing, trying out charter schools that don't have that many years under their belt, being left without a school mid-year due to closing or trying to move just to get into a better school district. The EdChoice Scholarship has been priceless to our family. It has allowed us to live within the Columbus Public School Districts and make the choice of where our children can continue to get an exceptional education.

The scholarship does such a great service to the families who feel they do not have options with failing school districts and a hit or miss with the lottery schools. I hope that the EDChoice Program will remain available in the years to come. We have a toddler who will be joining the ranks of the other kids in just a few years. And ,although my oldest son was not able to benefit from the program, because of the financial help with our other two children we were able to finance him up through his last year at a private Catholic high school where he is graduating from with honors.

I have been an educator in a private Catholic school for over nine years. I know the importance of the scholarship for myself and to other families that I have helped throughout the years. I know that we all consider it a blessing and would be lost without this funding.

Thank you for listening to my story. At this time, I'd be pleased to answer any questions.