



AMERICAN FEDERATION
for Children

House Bill 49 Testimony
Senate Finance – Primary and Secondary Education Subcommittee
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Alyson Miles
Deputy Director of Government Affairs
American Federation for Children

Chairman Hite, Vice Chair Sykes, and members of the committee. My name is Alyson Miles, and I'm the Deputy Director of Government Affairs for the American Federation for Children (AFC). Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Substitute House Bill 49, the Main Operating Budget for FY 2018 and FY 2019.

The American Federation for Children is a national advocacy organization, promoting school choice policies that empower parents to choose the best education program for their children. AFC focuses on advocating for school vouchers, scholarship tax credits, and education savings accounts. We support empowering parents with the ability to choose any educational option that is best suited for their children, whether it is in a traditional public school, community school, private school, or through virtual or blended learning or home-schooling. Our efforts focus on the students rather than the system.

Currently, there are 50 private school choice programs in 23 states and D.C. These programs are providing opportunities to parents and students to make a choice in their education. For many Ohio families, this is a choice they wouldn't otherwise have. Through these programs, students' lives are being changed for the better. For example, Jessica, a mom in Ohio, fought for her son to be able to leave his public school and enroll at a private provider with the help of the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship (JPSN). Her son has autism, and she explains that, despite every effort from his public school, it wasn't the right fit, and he wasn't learning. Under the JPSN program, her son's behavioral issues are now being addressed, and he is making huge academic gains.ⁱ

Katherine, a mom living in a low-income part of D.C., spends about four hours a day on the road with her daughter, Ashli, so she can attend a private school on the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship. She explains, "There's nothing more important to me than Ashli's education. I choose to go without less important things...in order to pay expenses for Ashli's education."ⁱⁱ

Clara, a parent of a student using a Cleveland Scholarship, explains, "The Cleveland Scholarship has helped her finish school and have a diploma and now go to college. That is why the

Cleveland Scholarship means a lot to me, because it has helped my kids to succeed and be someone in life.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Walter, a current college student who benefitted from the EdChoice Scholarship, did not expect to graduate from high school, let alone go to college. Walter explains, “If you would have told me maybe six or seven years ago that I would be in a place where I am...I would not have believed you.” Walter and his mom have talked about how he did not fit in at his school; he was unable to focus in class, was always causing trouble, and wasn’t learning. To Walter, “the EdChoice Scholarship means a second chance.”^{iv}

It is because of these stories and others like it that AFC works to promote these programs and see that quality choice programs are enacted and improved. As a national organization, we have state-based staff working with local groups, like School Choice Ohio (SCO), to accomplish these goals and help students be successful.

With SCO, AFC has been engaged in supporting and promoting Ohio’s five scholarship programs: the EdChoice Scholarship, the Income-Based Expansion, the Cleveland Scholarship & Tutoring Program, the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship, and the Autism Scholarship Program.

Cleveland Scholarship & Tutoring Program

The Cleveland Scholarship & Tutoring Program provides scholarships to attend a private school to any student living in the Cleveland Municipal School District. Current scholarship amounts for this program are \$4,250 for students in grades K-8 and \$5,700 for students in grades 9-12.

When these amounts are not enough to cover the tuition at the school, the parents or the private schools cover the difference. However, this is not a sustainable practice because it is an obstacle to parents being able to choose and will discourage high-performing schools from continuing to be providers.

Also, these amounts are lower than the EdChoice Scholarship program amounts. Students in Cleveland are not eligible for EdChoice and should not be treated differently when it comes to options for their education. AFC requests that an amendment be added to HB 49 to increase Cleveland scholarship amounts to equal EdChoice: \$4,650 for K-8 students and \$6,000 for 9-12 students. The Ohio Department of Education has informed us that no additional funding needs to be included in this budget to account for these increases.

Income-Based Expansion

In 2013, Ohio enacted the EdChoice Income-Based Expansion program to provide scholarships to students who are not eligible for the EdChoice or Cleveland programs and whose family income is at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines. This program is being phased-in over time, with a grade added each school year. This program is currently providing scholarships for students in Kindergarten through third grade. We support the continued phase-in for this program as proposed by HB 49: fourth grade will be added in the 2017-2018 school year, and fifth grade will be added in the 2018-2019 school year.

This program is funded through its own line-item appropriation. The As Introduced budget included additional funding each fiscal year to provide approximately 2,000 scholarships for each added grade. Unfortunately, due to the budget cuts that are being made, this appropriation was cut by 1.5% in each fiscal year. This will result in about 145 fewer students benefitting from the program each year. AFC urges the committee to restore this funding and provide Ohio's lowest-income families an option of where to send their children for school.

EdChoice Scholarship and Safe Harbor

Ohio's largest program, the EdChoice Scholarship, is a performance-based program that offers students in our lowest-performing public schools the option of attending a private school. A student is eligible if he or she is assigned to a public school that meets specific performance conditions listed in statute. Family income is used for prioritizing applications, if necessary, but is not a factor in eligibility.

While this program has provided thousands of students with a choice in their education, there are many children denied the option of participating in the program because of complicated eligibility requirements and a focus on the system rather than the students. This issue has been amplified by Ohio's safe harbor provision.

Ohio's safe harbor for school districts prohibits the state from issuing specific sanctions to school districts for performance ratings on state performance tests given in the 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-2017 school years. One "sanction" is for a school to be listed on the EdChoice eligibility list, which means that no new schools will be added to the EdChoice designated public schools list until the 2019-2020 school year.

AFC disagrees with the notion that being eligible for the EdChoice scholarship is somehow a consequence or punishment on schools. Providing educational opportunities for students is not a punishment. School choice is about providing students with an opportunity to have access to a better education, and this state, through its many choice options enacted in the past 20 years, has made it clear that it believes parents should have a choice in their children's education. However, safe harbor turns back the clock on this progress and denies students an opportunity.

It is important to note that not every kid who is eligible for EdChoice leaves their assigned school. Currently, there are about 105,000 students (out of the 1.5 million public school students in the state) eligible for this program, but only about 20,000 have chosen to use an EdChoice scholarship to attend a school other than their assigned public school. Most eligible families choose to keep their children where they are assigned. But for the 20,000 students who do choose to leave, it is an important lifeline for them that should not be denied to other students.

AFC urges the state to remove EdChoice eligibility and the option of choosing a different school from being listed as a "sanction" and update the designated public schools list with data collected over the safe harbor years.

Conclusion

Leaving a public school is not for everyone, but the choice to leave should be. Educational choice is about having options for a student's education and ensuring that those options are

funded. It is important to empower parents with the opportunities to choose the best type of program for their children.

Walter, the former EdChoice student, has said, “You fought for me before you even knew me.” As you work on the budget, I urge you to fight for these students, even though you don’t know them. Give them the option to choose where to go to school.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 49 and for your hard work for Ohio’s students. AFC and I look forward to working with you to strengthen the bill and Ohio’s choice programs. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Contact and Additional Information:

Alyson Miles

Deputy Director of Government Affairs

Email: amiles@federationforchildren.org

AFC Website: <http://www.federationforchildren.org/>

AFC YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/SchoolChoiceWorks>

ⁱ School Choice Ohio YouTube page: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OP9nWX2XaTM>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.federationforchildren.org/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.scoho.org/home/success-stories/>

^{iv} School Choice Ohio YouTube page: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MYFrG4QAnA&t=161s>