

Testimony Regarding HB 110

May 4, 2021

Tricia Stethem = #17

Good Morning, Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor, and the members of the Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony regarding HB110 and to share with you our personal stories and experiences with the Ohio Education Scholarships. Everyone here has a unique account of how this program impacts their family. My name is Tricia Stethem; I am from Sharonville, Ohio. My husband and I reside in the Princeton City School District. We are the parents of 3 school-age children, a senior, and a freshman, and a 7th grader.

Quality Education, in my opinion, is the most important resource I can provide my children. Our family has enrolled in private, public, homeschool, community, and parochial schools over the last 12 years. Each form has enriched their learning experiences. However, as a parent and home educator, I can confirm that no two students learn the same way. As a result, all 3 of my children vary in their academic successes. I define academic success not by a GPA or how many "A's" are on a report card but by how they thrive and grow to become fruitful contributors to our society. Therefore, I am a firm advocate that each parent needs to decide how to educate their child. If assistance is available, such as programing like Ed Choice or Fair School Funding, everyone should be allowed to utilize these resources regardless of their income or residence. Educators should be the most highly respected profession, (kudos to all the teachers out there as we celebrate Teacher Appreciation Day), and I believe it is more critical for families to have a say in deciding how to use their tax-paying dollars or educational funds.

We first became aware of eligibility for the Ed Choice in December 2019 when our assigned high school Princeton High School became identified on the Ed Choice performance index. Our daughter was exploring high school options and had decided on Mount Notre Dame High School in Cincinnati, Ohio. For many reasons based on her learning abilities, we felt this was the best choice for her coming from a homeschooled environment. Small classes, availability of student support services, and rigor of academics were the top 3 criteria to deciding on high school education for her. In addition, it seemed like a "best fit" for her educational and learning challenges. Knowing that the Traditional Ed Choice Scholarship would be available to our family to help fund a portion of tuition, we committed to MND and signed an enrollment contract. Weeks later, we learned the 20-21 school list was on pause, and further action would take place in April 2020. Then, Covid hit, and we all know what transpired from there, a decision to revert back to the 2019-2020 school list. Stressed over the new announcement of losing the scholarship funding, our family created a financial plan to cover the school year's expenses. Hoping that despite all the adversity everyone experienced due to covid, the revisions for the following year will prevail, and those elected in making the decisions on our behalf will "do the right thing." Unfortunately, that was not the case. Changes released in March 2021 impacted our family even more with new eligibility parameters. No longer was residence the main criteria, but numerous stipulations created hurdles for the average family's consideration for the funding. I am sure many other Ohioans can share the same story where school plans became disrupted by covid and financial reasons.

Recently I was told, "the scholarship program was never intended for someone like me." Although my family may not be at the 200% of poverty to qualify for the Ed Choice Expansion program, we have endured financial hardships this past year due to covid 19 & my husband's employer. An Ohio company negatively impacted by covid was forced to file bankruptcy, close a manufacturing plant, and furlough most of their employees. A 200-year-old company survived wars but found covid to be its greatest challenge yet. So although we may not qualify for the income-based funding, eligibility to Traditional Ed Choice would greatly assist our current financial situation. With recent changes to the scholarship program, only certain neighbors around me qualify. However, others like myself do not, all the while we all share our underperforming school district as it remains identified on the performance index list for the 2nd year in a row. I feel that this new policy created a "lost class" of students in the class of 2024 and excluded them from any consideration when establishing the revisions. Covid has impacted so many students already due to a variety of reasons. It, unfortunately, created disruptions to the incoming freshman class of 2024 and their eligibility for Ed Choice.

As a district resident, we fully support the public schools in our area. I am passionate about public school education. I dedicated my time to being an exclusive substitute teacher for the elementary schools in our district and help those in my community. New buildings were constructed, programming established, all the bells and whistles seem to be available to the students, yet it continues to be underperforming. Bottom 20% for both the 2020-21 list and the 21-22 list. We have helped pass levies, even though they significantly increased our taxes. We believe public school education is essential. I attended and graduated from a public school so many years ago.

However, I also think that a parent's school choice is more critical, and we have a right to educate our children as we see fit and use our state funding or tax dollars as needed. As a parent, I have chosen various methods to educate my children because they learn best in their independent way. Assuming all students learn the same is like putting square pegs in round holes; it will never fit no matter how many times you try. I have a square peg, and we believe we found the right academic fit for her. However, due to the recent changes, it has become increasingly challenging to afford it. As a resident in a district identified as poor performing, I believe I am entitled to receive the funding from the state or my taxes and choose my children's education. A neighbor next door has the same right and can enroll and receive Traditional Ed Choice because they fulfill the "revised" guidelines for the 21-22 school year. Our family once fulfilled the initial guidelines for 20-21. Supporting school choice is vital because it makes the playing field fair, especially to those of us who have followed all the rules.

I have given our school district consideration and opportunities to educate my children over the years, and unfortunately, it was unable to meet our academic needs. Even when we utilized the district for middle school education, we had to reach into our own pockets and pay for advanced level classes from an outside source since the school was unable to provide. While our son, a very high achieving student, attended Princeton Middle School, he was not academically challenged when placed in higher-level "gifted" classes. One advised option was to have him skip a grade level, but that did not seem like the logical choice, so we proposed to administrators that we create a separate curriculum for him. The Middle School Administration was incredibly accommodating and helpful as I researched the courses that were outside the district's programs. I paid for independent study classes through The Keystone School while my son completed the coursework as an enrolled Princeton Middle School student. At the

time, I paid taxes to the school district and then again I paid for my son to take advanced level classes through another source, all while enrolled/attending the school district. The following year, we allowed him to take Honors level classes at the High School. However, high school-level classes in the 8th grade once again did not challenge him academically, and we found the course work to be less than sub-par. We were putting a Band-Aid on a wound and not fixing the overall problem. We found an academic fit once we enrolled him into a private, parochial high school for the 9-12th grade that could provide him with an appropriate academic track.

I also explored enrollment in the Princeton City Schools for another child who struggled with learning challenges. I had her evaluated by the district and advised that although they would create a plan for her, they had far greater learning issues within the community. As I observed grade-level classrooms she would be assigned, it was clear to me the district would not provide her with the level of attention I felt she needed. I took the responsibility upon myself to homeschool her. Homeschooling allowed her to find the right learning environment to create academic success and self-confidence in her achievements. The four years of homeschooling gave her a smooth transition back into a traditional school environment – the environment that proved to be the best fit for her was, Mount Notre Dame High School.

My youngest child has also been homeschooled for the last four years and will continue to do so until she decides otherwise. She is academically talented and will undoubtedly figure out the right fit for her when the time comes.

All in all, we have tried to give the district a fair chance to educate our children. But, unfortunately, the system did not fit our educational needs. We are paying into a district that we cannot utilize and feel we should be able to take our tax dollars or funds awarded from the state elsewhere. So once again, I ask you hear my plea to give students and families the opportunity to make the choice.

Lower class, middle class, and upper-class families are all struggling right now from the impact of the pandemic. I expect this is not something that will go away in the near future and will have lasting effects on our communities. Why create an additional layer of stress to families that are desperately trying to make it work? When families are unexpectedly financially impacted from circumstances out of their control, like covid or an illness, job loss, etc., why deny them the opportunity to receive these scholarship opportunities, especially when they reside in an identified failing district or are ineligible for other ODE funding resources? Allowing families to decide their school path with either HB110 or consider another look at the revisions made this year to Ed Choice since the changes have negatively affected so many working families.

That is my story, three students, three very different academic paths, and I have worked 300% harder to figure out and carve an approach that best suits them for academic success. Every parent & student should be given equal and fair advantages to doing what they feel is best. I thank the chair and the committee for hearing my testimony today. Thank you for the continued time and energy to support the Educational Scholarships and realize how important this bill is in giving fair learning to every Ohio student. I am sure I speak on behalf of many families experiencing similar situations. We are all trying to do the right thing for our children, especially during a time when it is most difficult and like no other in the past.