

March 10, 2023

HB 11 House Primary and Secondary Education Committee

Testimony of Dr. Cy Smith, Superintendent of Mansfield Christian School

Chairman Bird and Members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee,

Mansfield Christian School has participated in the EdChoice Scholarship Program since its inception in 2005-2006 in order to make Christian education a reality for those not commonly served by private schools. My name is Dr. Cy Smith, Superintendent of Mansfield Christian School and I am urging you to pass HB 11, commonly known as the Backpack Bill. I am an alumnus of Mansfield Christian and this is my 31st year in education. I serve as the State of Ohio School Representative for ACSI (the Association of Christian Schools International) representing over 100 Christian schools statewide. I also serve as a School Accreditation Commissioner for the Central Division of ACSI, in order to ensure that our private schools are not only meeting state standards, but exceeding them in order to provide an exceptional school experience for families. Finally, I represent over 40 schools in northeast Ohio as President of the Greater Cleveland Christian Administrator's Association.

Mansfield Christian School enrolls almost 700 students (PreK-12), residing in 22 different districts across six counties in north central Ohio. A total of 184 students, or 30%, are enrolled using one of the EdChoice scholarships. We also participate in the John Peterson Program that services 72 of our students with special needs in grades K-12. Contrary to public opinion, our schools seek to serve as broad of a spectrum of students as possible working within the parameters of our mission. Indeed, we are blessed that Ohio's state funding supports for private schools are among the best in the country. Most of our schools follow all state and federal regulations, including standardized testing, in order to access the available funding sources and subsequently admit students from varying socio-economic backgrounds and academic conditions. Our schools commonly work to keep tuition charges in-line with the costs per student. With tuition ranging from roughly \$5,000-\$11,000 in most of our schools across the state, we are not economically elitist institutions. Parent surveys show that we are predominately made up of middle-class families that have chosen to add private school tuition to their family budget, in addition to funding their local public schools with property tax dollars.

Christian schools like Mansfield Christian are transforming students' lives across the state of Ohio. I have received dozens of emails, letters, and phone calls through the years from parents that are extremely thankful for the opportunity they have received from the scholarship program. Most consider the program an answer to prayer and they express at length their appreciation for our willingness to participate.

"In elementary, we had to move our girls to a public school to have access to special education, which was extremely difficult. We were thrilled when MCS expanded their special education and offered the John Peterson Scholarship! We were able to come back to MCS and now they are

thriving more than ever! Thank you, Mansfield Christian staff, for caring deeply about our students and their spiritual and educational growth!” - MCS Parent

I would like to address the narrative that private schools steal public funds and public schools suffer as the result. This is simply not true. If this were indeed the case, EdChoice would have been abandoned during the recession 13 years ago as the population of both the state and our schools declined rapidly. We know that education contains both fixed costs and variable costs. Studies that examine the savings and costs of America’s private school programs, such as Martin Lueken’s, *Fiscal Effects of School Vouchers* (2018)*, demonstrate the significance of these costs to this discussion.

The fixed costs for education remain stable whether a child is enrolled in a particular school or not, such as utilities, maintenance, and administrative expenses (approx.. \$5,000 per student in Ohio). Variable costs are those directly connected to the student such as the teacher, curriculum, and other needed resources (approx.. \$8,000 in Ohio). The variable costs leave when a student leaves and the district does not spend that money. In Ohio, fittingly, those variable costs may be sent to a private school in the form of a voucher for that student ranging from \$5,500-\$7,500. Leuken’s analysis demonstrated that in Ohio, as in other voucher states, as long as the amount deducted from the state’s per pupil contribution is less than the per student variable costs, there is no net financial harm to the public school. The costs to the public school go down by an amount greater than the loss of the scholarship amount. In fact, the district saves money and may increase the per pupil expenditures for those who remain because it keeps the fixed cost allocation as well as the difference between the voucher amount and the variable costs. No fiscal analysis of any voucher programs in the United States that accounts for both costs and savings, has found that these programs result in a net negative fiscal impact on taxpayers.

The Backpack Bill is an equitable approach to education for so many families that otherwise would never have access to schools that align with their values and the educational objectives for their children. In this sense, I must address fit over eligibility. Families do not necessarily leave a public school simply because they are eligible. If this were true, private school enrollment should have increased significantly in the last 17 years in Ohio and across the country, but this has not been the case. Private Christian schools exist for a specific mission; most commonly to serve as an extension of the Christian home and church in teaching and training students from a biblical worldview. At no point during the admissions process, are EdChoice scholarship families considered outside of this purpose. If the values of the family and student fit the mission, then our schools work tirelessly to succeed with the child. Mansfield Christian School has graduated 150+ EdChoice scholarship students over 17 years. Only after these students were afforded an educational choice and the priority of missional fit resolved, did these families commit to an MCS education.

“My middle boy struggles with traditional learning and has been met with patience and accommodations to help him grow and strive. We cannot adequately express our gratitude for MCS. Every one of the staff members evidently cares about the students. They are receiving a

quality, sound education, while learning how to follow after God. We are so blessed!" - MCS parent

In September of 2022, I attended an ACSI legislative policy meeting in Washington, DC. Senator Ted Cruz addressed the delegates using a powerful opening line, "School choice is the civil rights issue of our day." Landmark moments created by convictions for equal opportunity and choice are replete across the pages of our American history. As we witness the national momentum for programs akin to the Backpack Bill sweep across the states, I would agree with Senator Cruz that school choice will soon emerge as a fundamental right of American citizenship. The time of the "common school" has passed, just as virtually every other field and endeavor is characterized by freedom of choice. Parents reside in communities with multiple quality choices and schooling is no exception.

On behalf of those of us leading private, Christian schools across the state of Ohio, we have no desire to see our educational system regress to a "one size fits all" approach based on circumstantial geography or socioeconomics. Rather, we ask and implore our legislators to proactively and positively address the reality of the American condition – that is, allowing parents to access public funding for the freedom to choose the best educational option for their children.

Thank you for your time and consideration of the matter.

***<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Fiscal-Effects-of-School-Vouchers-by-Martin-Lueken.pdf>**

