

Russell R. Gifford
Testimony in Support of HB 339

Chairman Bird, Vice Chairman Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson and members of the Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to express my support of House Bill 339, Educational Savings Accounts for Non-Chartered, Non-Public Schools.

My name is Russell Gifford, and I reside in Ashtabula County. After retiring as CEO of CNG Energy Services, my wife and I opened Agape Christian Academy 19 years ago in 2005 as a non-chartered, non-public school in Burton, Ohio. We are now a Preschool through Twelfth Grade school with two campus locations in Geauga County serving nearly 300 students.

When HB 33 was passed, we were encouraged that our families would be able to access funds to attend a school of their choice including Agape Christian Academy. A private school in our county sent a letter informing families they could attend their school free. However, as we looked more closely into HB33 we discovered that non-chartered, non-public (NCNP) schools were not included in the bill and that our families would not have access to any funds unless we chartered. The bill had been advertised as making education available to a school of choice for all families.

Before continuing, I would like to briefly explain why Agape Christian Academy had chosen not to charter when our school opened in the fall of 2005 with 10 students from eight families.

We are not affiliated with a church but hold to deeply held religious beliefs from scripture that enable us to provide families with a strong academic education grounded in absolute Biblical values of character, morality, and behavior. As a result, we opened as an "08 school" now called non-chartered, non-public.

Since our school opened in 2005, we have accepted no government funds for our school including for textbooks, computers, science laboratories, bus transportation, etc. We have done so to preserve our commitment to a quality education founded on truly held religious beliefs.

I would like now to present three reasons why I am supporting HB 339 which is before your committee.

First, while we provide nearly \$40,000 in student financial aid to our families, the impact of inflation has made our tuition, even though it's far below market value, less affordable. This puts an increased financial burden on our families. The cost of living is a significant reason many families can no longer choose private or religious schools for their students. I am sure you are seeing the cost of living today impact many of your constituents in your districts.

HB 33 was entitled Universal Choice Program and was advertised by many as now giving all families an opportunity to select a school of their choice for their student. This is not the case

for families who were selecting non-chartered, non-public schools who in the end were left out of HB 33 and received no benefit from that legislation.

I am pleased that HB 339 would correct that situation and provide families with access to an education savings account which would provide resources they can direct to a non-chartered, non-public school of their choice.

Second, since we opened in 2005, we have annually given our students standardized national achievement tests which provide accountability to our families that their student is receiving a quality academic education while enabling us to monitor the effectiveness of our curriculum. During our time as a NCNP school, we have also provided additional opportunities for our students to receive an education which equips them for the career to which they believe God has called them. We have offered College Credit Plus since its inception to our 7th through 12th grade students. This enables our students to gain college level class experience as well as earn college credits while in high school.

Agape Christian Academy also has a partnership with Auburn Career Center serving Geauga and Lake Counties which enables our students to earn a diploma from Agape as well as graduate from Auburn with a specific vocational degree.

Furthermore, our graduates fulfill all of the ODE/DEW graduation requirements (20 credits minimum) and actually graduate with a minimum of 25 credits. We also offer a work study program for seniors who have found a career they believe they wish to pursue. The student is able to work 20 hours per week and graduate with a minimum of 25 credits.

Finally, my third reason for supporting HB 339 is that our daughter was able to get a quality education grounded in absolute biblical values of character, morality and behavior in addition to completing 15 credit hours of College at Cedarville. She attended Agape from first grade through high school graduation in 2017 earning all top marks. She attended Cedarville University graduating with honors in 2021. Upon graduation she was hired by Cedarville University to work as a Global Outreach Coordinator coordinating, training and sending teams of Cedarville students on short-term mission trips serving the needs of people around the world. She is now enrolled in Graduate School at the University of Bologna, Italy studying Human Rights.

In closing, I want to again thank you for the opportunity to express my support for HB 339 and urge you to pass it out of committee so the parents of non-chartered, non-public schools can continue their education at a school of their choice thus receiving the same options being afforded those students in the Universal School Choice Program.

Thank you,
Russell Gifford