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Phillip M. Robinson Jr.
State Representative
Ohio House District 19

Committees:
Primary & Secondary
Education, Ranking

Finance
Finance Subcommittee on
Primary & Secondary Education

Financial Institutions

Higher Education

The EdChoice Fair Fiscal Responsibility Act / House Bill 567
Sponsor Testimony for House Primary & Secondary Education Committee
December 3, 2024

Chairwoman Manning, Vice-Chair Fowler-Arthur, and members of the Ohio House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill (HB) 567, the EdChoice Fair Fiscal Responsibility Act. My joint sponsor, Representative Sean Brennan, and I look forward to productive conversations with the committee and all related stakeholders.

Ohio's private school voucher programs have grown from \$42 million in 2008 to more than \$610 million last school year ('22-'23) to now **\$970.7 million** this school year ('23-'24). That is \$6.2 million more than what the Legislative Service Commission (LSC) had estimated. Of those funds, more than a third, \$406.7 million, was from income-based EdChoice vouchers. That is **over triple cost the previous year**, which was \$124.4 million. That does not include the over \$225 million each year private schools get for auxiliary and administrative costs. And that does not cover the transportation costs public school districts incur to transport private school students to school. Right now, we have very few ways of knowing how public dollars are being spent in private schools, or whether vouchers are truly benefitting the students that receive them. We need guardrails on how much of taxpayers' dollars go to private schools.

The operating budget's expansion led to a 45% increase in EdChoice. However, traditional public school student levels have mostly stayed the same, with slight decline of 0.42% (6,000 students) compared to last school year. Nonpublic school enrollment increased only about 2% (3,349 students). This data illustrates that most new recipients of the vouchers already attend private schools, allowing families who can already afford to pay for their kids' private school tuition to benefit from the program. Meanwhile, a growing number of school districts are bracing for steep budget cuts and deficits, and potentially multiple levies in the hopes of avoiding insolvency or other financial struggles.

This legislation sets fair income limits and rules around the income-based EdChoice vouchers (also called the EdChoice Expansion Scholarship) and other needed reforms to voucher programs. This bill is not about limiting the use of vouchers. It is about making sure that when taxpayers dollars are being utilized, we have the tools necessary to follow their use and impact.

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This legislation will require several key components, including the following:

- Change qualifying income for income-based EdChoice vouchers to:
 - At or below 250% Federal Poverty Level (FPL) for initial eligibility;
 - Up to 300% FPL, will receive a prorated 75% of voucher amount;
 - Between 300 – 399% FPL, will receive a prorated 50% of voucher amount;
 - Between 400 – 450% FPL, will receive a prorated 25% of voucher amount.
- Requires that lower income students will have priority in receiving the voucher.
- Creates an income cap to keep the wealthiest families from accessing the voucher, prioritizing families truly in need.
- Move to an all income-based voucher system and transitioning away from school performance-based vouchers, while grandfathering in those already in the current system.
- Require that the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (ODEW) notify school districts when a student residing within their school district receives approval for any type of voucher.
- Require that proof of family income be submitted when applying for an income-based EdChoice voucher, bringing back income verification rules repealed in the last state budget, and return the application deadline to July 1st for the vouchers.

This bill is based on amended SB 89 from the 133rd General Assembly (GA). Amended SB 89 was a bipartisan House solution to a previous voucher crisis created by the Ohio Statehouse. During the 133rd General Assembly, after the Ohio Senate added language to the state operating budget that dramatically expanded the list of schools that would fall under performance-based EdChoice vouchers (also called the Traditional EdChoice Scholarship). The provision was flawed and overreaching, causing the existing list to more than double to over 1,200 schools for the next academic year. This provision even included schools with high ratings, even overall A ratings on the state report card. It was an artificial crisis that could have hurt public schools while inaccurately portraying their quality as failing.

This crisis led to the special public conference committee meetings on the proposals to fix the problem. From February 11, 2020 to February 20, 2020, there were nine public meetings with over 49 hours of public testimony and debate on the House and Senate solutions to the EdChoice expansion crisis. Over 500 people from the public participated, with over 350 individual and joint, in-person testimonies, and over 100 more additional written-testimonies. People came from all over the state - rural, urban, and suburban areas - to talk about the good, the bad, and the ugly of our school voucher system. Now we face potentially a new looming crisis with an uncapped voucher system passed in our most recent state operating budget.

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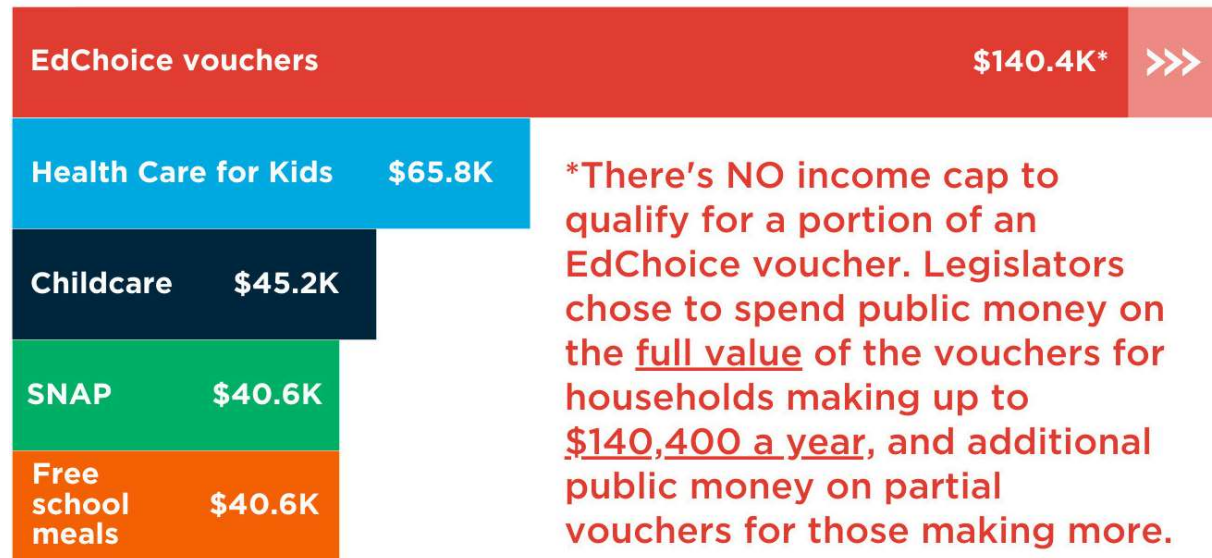
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Annual income cap for a family of 4 to access public services



*Graphic created by the Policy Matters Ohio

The above graphic illustrates a final and an important point. The original purpose of our vouchers was to help the poorest families afford other potential school options, but now the program has forgotten its purpose. Under the current rules, a family above 750% FPL (or a family of four with an annual income of \$234,000 or more, over a quarter of a million dollars a year) can get up to a \$950 voucher for a high school student. Why should we allow millionaires to get access to nearly a thousand dollars off their kid's tuition, yet Ohioans with average or median income make too much to access state childcare programs? Why should wealthy families have access to private school vouchers while average Ohioans can't afford daycare for their children? Let's return the program back to its roots and its original purpose to help Ohio families in need like other state programs.

Chairwoman Manning, Vice-Chair Fowler-Arthur, and members of the committee, I thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions you have.

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