

Finance Subcommittee on Primary & Secondary Education

Ohio House of Representatives

March 16, 2023

I want to Thank you, Committee Chair Richardson and members of the Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education for this opportunity.

My name is Jennifer Kutz. I am the Edchoice nominator and tuition officer at Emmanuel Christian School in Toledo, Ohio. Emmanuel Christian is one of the top twenty utilizers of Ohio's Edchoice Scholarship, with 485 active applicants out of a total enrollment of 585 students.

First, I wish to thank you all for your persistent work to start, maintain, and improve the Edchoice program. I stand with you in believing we can make educational choice a more equitable option here in Ohio. I look forward to the future & pray that the backpack bill will become a reality. For now, however, I am grateful for the forward momentum and wish to present the realities of the needs I see every day.

Every public high school in Toledo is on the designated list, we service a diverse and marginalized population that closely mirrors the population diversity of our city. Edchoice has paved a way to opportunity and choice for thousands of students in our region. However, the challenges to accessing school choice, that I am presenting today, cannot be overcome with the current presentation of the backpack bill.

I sit face to face regularly with parents who grew up in the inner-city schools, who are desperate to make a change for their child; to free them from the pressures of drugs & gangs, so that they can learn in an environment that upholds their family ideals. Their relief and pride that they can make this life-altering choice for their child is tangible.

I also sit with parents who live just out of reach of Edchoice. Those who chose to live in the greater safety of a suburb but see now that while the suburb schools test scores are better, the environment is still not leading their child in wholesome ways. Their income often is just barely over the qualification limit, however with the current inflation, they cannot make the tuition commitment. These families often leave my office disappointed, feeling stuck as they do not wish to move their family from their safer neighborhood just to afford eligibility for choice.

The final set of parents that I wish to mention are those falling into the 201-215% of the poverty level range. These families are hit hard. So many times a family finds themselves only \$100 over the limit for the income qualified write off, which causes them to have an increased financial burden of up to \$3000/student annually. While Emmanuel Christian offers several ways to offset this expense (volunteering and school-based incentive programs) these are often hard-working

families who do not have the time to attend to the incentives. Many of these families have had to walk away from private education, as it is still out of reach.

Given my position in accounts receivables, I also am privy to the struggle of the school itself. With nearly 70% of our Edchoice students receiving the low-income eligibility (200% or lower), our school takes a great hit in writing off over \$700,000 annually in remaining tuition balances. With the recent inflation and post-covid challenges, our school scrapes by to cover its obligations.

We have had to increase non-tuition fees or institute new ones just to stay afloat. This has impacted our low-income eligible families the most, making educational choice harder to obtain. Four years ago, a low-income qualifying student could attend Emmanuel Christian for the cost of enrollment: \$150. This allowed our most marginalized families to have access, and even to opt into additional programming. This year that same student may pay up to \$1300 annually. Our past due balances are doubling, and we are having to inform families who are behind in payment that re-enrollment cannot be offered.

We wish to be a partner with Ohio in educational choice, we believe in it, we want it for our children and our community. However, if we are to partner, we are desperate for some additional considerations, so that we can provide equitable support to our community.

We want the backpack bill, but before we move to the backpack bill there are important and necessary steps to consider in order to build a healthy vibrant program that is prepared for full transition so that the infrastructure of private schools is not overwhelmed, and educational choice remains equitable.

First: Please consider an increase to the scholarship that reflects the rate of current inflation.

Second: Please consider creating income qualifying markers that provide a boost to private schools when they cannot charge the tuition remainder. Help us to close the gap in the lost tuition so that we can continue to reach our most marginalized families, without penalty. With this, I would suggest adjusting the low-income qualification from 200% to 225% or 250%.

And Third: Please consider moving the Expansion eligibility to 400% of the poverty level.

Finally, I wish to highlight three practical non-budget considerations to assist our most marginalized families:

1. Streamlining/linking government programs: our low-income families are having to present the same material over and over to multiple organizations to secure food, housing, childcare, and education. Is there a way to simplify access to these governmental programs?
2. Remove the "Dad Penalty": single fathers are required to produce more documentation than single mothers. This seems to penalize the fathers who have stepped up. Can we level the playing field for these dads?

3. Allow the first date of attendance to be the eligibility date: Currently EdChoice scholarships are prorated by the award date. This presents a large challenge as many of our most marginalized families do not have quick access to necessary documentation. Various factors may include being transient between homes or having the lack of access to transportation and internet. The delay causes a penalty to these families and subsequently to the schools.

I have personally addressed these functional issues with the office of non-public education options. As these are dictated by legislated parameters, I now present them to you also for consideration.

As someone in the field, I see these 3 budgetary and 3 functional requests as incremental steps that will lead to a more sustainable program for both the families and the private schools in Ohio as we work to make educational choice an option for all.

I welcome any questions you may have. Thank you for your time and your sincere care for the families and all schools in Ohio.