

**Opponent Testimony on School Choice in HB 33**  
**Ohio Senate Education Committee, May 4, 2023**  
from Joan Spoerl, M.A.T., Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44118

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram and Members of the Ohio Senate Education Committee:

I am writing to express my strong opposition to any expansion of EdChoice vouchers for private school tuition in HB 33. This proposition makes no sense to me as I consider the vision of our founders and those who wrote the Ohio Constitution. It is fiscally irresponsible, wasteful, inefficient and harms rather than supports the common good. Private is private and exclusive. Public is public and open for all, advancing the common good. Public dollars should prioritize, advance and support the public good. When we work together to strengthen our public schools, we strengthen and unify communities. This should be the goal of Ohio legislators. I applaud those who worked together to craft legislation helpful to 90% of Ohio's school-age children like the Fair School Funding legislation and support its full long-term funding. This investment will pay dividends in the near future and in the long term.

As proud parents of a senior at Cleveland Heights High School who has attended our public schools since kindergarten, my husband and I know about and value quality education and we chose public, because it brings together all types of people, in our own beloved racially and socio-economically diverse community, is open to all and striving to uplift all and excel despite difficult odds. We care about all the children in our community and know how important it is that there be well-supported public schools available to all when they need them.

My parents sent my older siblings to parochial school and that was their choice but they would never have expected the government to fund that choice. They were always supportive of our local public schools and were glad they were available for me to attend.

Strong support of public education is one of your primary responsibilities as outlined in the Ohio Constitution. Also, given that approximately 90% of school-age children in Ohio choose to attend public schools, they should be your priority.

I share our founding fathers' convictions about education's critical place in elevating humanity and the common good, upholding our democracy, and that it should be the highest priority of government, free of political influence. I share their high aspirations and vision of a system so grand that, in John Adams words, "it is unknown to any other people ancient or modern" and "that knowledge must become so general as to raise the lower ranks of Society to the higher."

In 1851, the Ohioans who wrote about education in the state Constitution intended to "see a system of schools as perfect as could be devised, and to see it improve so as to keep pace with the most rapid progress of the most rapid element of our social or political constitution."

Many years have passed since 1851 but it's never too late to get it right and to demonstrate your commitment to educational excellence, to the founding fathers' vision and to the oath you swore to the Constitution.

The legislature is constitutionally mandated to provide adequate and equitable funding so every student in every **public school district** has the benefit of a sound education regardless of the community's capacity to fund its public schools. Such a constitutional imperative is your first and dominant duty. Yet

it is one that has been shirked for far too long in Ohio. Rather than divert money to private schools, you should be working to invest robustly in public schools to support Ohio's future workforce.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to boast that Ohio has the best public schools in the nation no matter the type of community in which they're located? That would be a worthy goal towards which to strive. Again, it's your constitutional duty.

Education expert Joshua Cowen, who has been conducting voucher research for two decades has written in a recent Time Magazine article:

*"When we look at all the challenges to accessing education with these programs it's clear that actually winning admission to a particular private school is not about parental school choice. It's the school's choice.*

*That is what research on school vouchers tells us. Vouchers are largely tax subsidies for existing private school families, and a tax bailout for struggling private schools. They have harmful test score impacts that persist for years, and they're a revolving door of school enrollment. They're public funds that support a financially desperate group of private schools, including some with active discriminatory admissions in place."*

When I listened to testimony relating to state education policies in February of 2020, I was struck by the oft-repeated themes from public school supporters from every kind of community in Ohio - small, medium, large, rural and urban. Rural community members described their public schools as the heart or center of their community. Many voiced pride about how their public schools welcome and serve all who need them, turn away no one, weaving together all kinds of children and families, forming a beautiful tapestry of community. But I also learned that my community isn't unique in finding its beautiful fabric too often weakened or rent by decades of state neglect and punitive policies.

I entered the field of early childhood education 30 years ago after studying public policy in college at the University of Chicago. I recognized then what research and my own experience have borne out – that generous investments in the continuum of human development from the earliest years and into adulthood pay immense dividends down the line. On the other hand, in Ohio, we see how people and communities have paid a price when government fails to invest as fairly and robustly in public education as the founders intended.

We know that the early childhood years are critical for getting things right but we also have to continue robust investments after early childhood, especially for those who started out behind. If I discover that my child is weakened by illness, do I walk away? Do I punish them? Do I call them names? Do I blame them? Do I cause further harm? Do I neglect to feed them and instead offer their food to others? No. I seek expert advice, and then nourish and enrich that child as much as possible. I don't label them "failing." I care for them. This analogy applies to your obligation to our public schools and the children they serve. Pay now to improve lives to produce a stronger, more literate citizenry and workforce or pay later for neglecting to do so with an unprepared and less literate workforce. It's a moral and economic imperative.