



May 4, 2023
Senate Education Committee
Testimony on HB 33
Presented by Melissa Cropper,
President of Ohio Federation of Teachers

Chair Brenner, Vice-Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, I am Melissa Cropper, President of the Ohio Federation of Teachers (OFT). OFT represents teachers in traditional and charter schools, support staff, higher education faculty and staff, social workers, library employees, and other public employees across the state of Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to testify about HB 33, specifically the sections that expand private school vouchers to the vast majority of Ohioans

First, I want to praise and thank the House for renewing their commitment to the Fair School Funding Plan and using this biennial budget to enact years three and four of the planned six-year phase in period. The House listened to public school districts, teachers, and parents, and improved the funding formula by updating the cost inputs so that funding is based on the actual costs of educating Ohio's children in 2023, not based on pre-inflation cost data from 2018. Equally important, the House also updated the additional costs needed for educating students with disabilities and students who are learning English as a second language, and set up a study to determine the additional costs needed for educating economically disadvantaged students.

These are all important steps that have broad bipartisan support in Ohio's statehouse and in Ohio's schoolhouses. We hope that you join your House colleagues in support.

We're here today to talk about private school voucher expansion. OFT opposes further expansion of Ohio's EdChoice scholarships.

In its current version, HB 33 would increase the family income eligibility threshold to qualify for an income-based EdChoice scholarship from 250% of the federal poverty level to 450% (\$135,000 for a family of four) beginning in 2024.

Year after year we see proposals in Ohio to keep expanding private school vouchers. This expansion has been great for private schools, but it has been an obstacle toward the full and fair funding of Ohio's public schools, which 90% of Ohio students attend. As teachers, parents, taxpayers, and community members, we have a moral imperative to do everything possible to ensure that our public schools are fully funded before additional funds are diverted to unaccountable private schools. As legislators, you have a constitutional responsibility to do the same.

When we compare the income thresholds for private school vouchers with the income thresholds for other, more essential services, we see how out-of-step this policy proposal is.

- In order to qualify for food assistance under the WIC program, a family in Ohio must earn less than 185% of the poverty level.
- To qualify for publicly funded child care they must earn less than 142% of the poverty level (Governor DeWine's budget proposal increases this to 160%).
- To qualify for pre-K / early education funds, they must earn less than 200% of the poverty level.
- To qualify for Medicaid, they must earn less 156% of poverty level or for CHIP, 206% of poverty level
- And to qualify for Ohio Works First, the financial assistance portion of the state's TANF program, a family must earn less than 50% of the poverty level.

Investing in these items – food assistance, child care, pre-K/early childhood education, and direct cash assistance – will do much more to reduce poverty and improve educational outcomes for Ohio's kids than this reckless expansion of private school vouchers. Attending pre-K gives children a strong foundation that elementary school teachers can build on, allowing students to thrive early in school and develop confidence and a love for learning. Likewise, kids who go to school hungry, or while experiencing housing instability, or when experiencing poor health (whether it be a temporary illness or chronic conditions like asthma, poor vision, hearing issues, etc) do not perform at their best. As legislators, you have the ability to make a positive impact on all of these issues, if there is enough political will.

Assistance for private school is not a greater need for families than essentials like food, health, childcare, pre-K, and direct cash assistance. If low-income families had as much lobbying capacity as private school supporters do, perhaps there would be less of a discrepancy in eligibility for these programs. Why on earth would this state consider funding vouchers at the 450% of poverty level under the guise of creating better education opportunities when basic needs that directly impact a child's ability to learn have not been adequately met and are not funded at even close to that same level.

Please continue implementing the Fair School Funding Plan and ensure that all of Ohio's public schools are adequately and equitably funded before considering a costly, unneeded expansion of private school vouchers.

EdChoice voucher eligibility should not be expanded at this time. This concludes my testimony and I welcome any questions.