

Chair Fowler Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Robinson, and Honorable Members of the House Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.

Good afternoon. My Name is Meghann Lightfoot. My husband and I with our three children reside in the Columbus City School District, and our two oldest children attend a non-chartered, non-public school.

I am not sending my testimony today because there is not enough money for education in Ohio but rather because my school has been overlooked in the allocation of that money, invalidating the claim that Ohio has universal school choice. I firmly believe that the money needs to follow the student, especially right now.

Our home is located in Columbus City School district, where the government issues \$22,500/student to the public schools for their education. But Avalon Elementary, where my boys would attend, has received a nearly failing rating every year, scoring at the bottom 25% of public schools in all of Ohio, with reading proficiency at 32% and math proficiency at 27% according to data from US News and World Report. While I doubt any would assume that we should be content with that, I believe most would argue we have plenty of other options for our children. And while that statement wouldn't be entirely wrong, as the money is allocated right now, *the school of our choice* for our family is left out of any financial aid support.

I understand then, that the primary argument for us would be, "why don't you then send your children to one of the many high-performing chartered, non-public schools in the area for which we've expanded the Ed Choice program?" Or, what we may even hear more often, "why doesn't your current school just become chartered?" And while I can appreciate that rationale, the first negates our being able to make the *choice* that we actually see as best-suited for our family. And the second rationale is something that our school will not do so that we can maintain this system of learning that stands outside of the time and space of current state demands while producing critical thinkers. But as a parent, I *am* able to share that what my children are able to do because of the education they are receiving at our school is unparalleled and puts them leaps and bounds above their peers. They come home reciting lengthy, classic poetry, are reading proficiently through phonics instruction, engage in mental math that applies regularly outside of the classroom, and many, many more things.

My background is as a secondary English teacher. During my time in the field, I had the opportunity to experience teaching in a chartered public school, nonpublic chartered school, public school, and then ultimately, even homeschool. My interest in and affinity for the classical model was sparked at the beginning of my career, as I grew to see and believe this is the best type of learning for all children. It was verified as I realized that many of my graduating seniors were often not equipped to think critically or form their own ideas in a written piece, and I was regularly faced with the dilemma of passing them through while knowing many were often not ready. All of this pressure to pass them based on "having met state standards" that says they are ready for college reigned down from "college readiness standards" to which I had to adhere, despite me teaching at a chartered, nonpublic school.

As such, when it came time for us to consider the type of education that we would want for our family, my husband and I eagerly desired classical education for our boys. When faced with the *choice* of what to do when our eldest began first grade, we decided to homeschool using a classical model, because no schools existed nearby that met our desires for him. And while it was a wonderful program, vigorous and vast in its breadth of information, treating the student as just *that*—one to whom truth and learning should be imparted so that he or she could develop and engage with the world around him or her—my oldest son ultimately needed more structure than homeschool could offer. So, when the opportunity arose for us to enroll both of our boys into a new non-charted, nonpublic school, where they would receive the type of education we had only dreamt of being able to give them, we were elated.

We are immensely grateful for our school and for the amazing education that is being provided our boys, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to afford this option. Despite us being upstanding, tax-paying citizens of Columbus, we still pay taxes to a school system we don't use while we receive \$0 toward the school of our *choice*. While the Ed Choice expansion has covered approximately 80% of school choice, we find ourselves in the 20% who are left behind, therefore proving that Ohio is still not able to offer universal school choice, though that statement may often be boasted to others.

In addition to the price of tuition, which isn't covered in its entirety, despite generous scholarships, we are also paying high book fees, enrollment fees, and uniform fees every year. Clearly, based on the expansion of the Ed Choice voucher and its vast utilization (with extensive waitlists at nearly every private school), *many* Ohio parents desire greater educational opportunities for their students. While I firmly believe that what is being offered at our school is far superior, it's hard for me to pay for our own education, let alone convince my friends to join us in this venture that is literally unparalleled.

Therefore, I contend that if a student doesn't attend a public school, the state funds to educate the student should be made available in an educational savings account to be spent at an Ohio chartered or non-chartered private school. This is the best option we currently have for Ohio to truly offer "universal school choice."

Additionally, Ohio would save money with a new ESA model on average per pupil, because the average public school is requiring over \$18,000 in funds to educate a student while the Ed Choice voucher is less than half of that (see table cited at end of written testimony). Additionally, if the public schools are not meeting the needs of Jon Peterson scholarship awardees, then that money should also be available to follow the student, in addition to money for tuition when they switch to a private school. Expanding school choice, if done in a fiscally responsible way, can decrease the budget for education and, in many cases, public schools will benefit too by receiving the local property tax dollars but not the student to educate.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony on supporting education opportunity for Ohio families in House Bill 96.

Source of data is Table 1 below found in the following Fordham Institute article:
<https://fordhaminstitute.org/ohio/commentary/irrational-hysteria-over-billion-dollar-price-tag-ohios-private-school-scholarships>

Table 1: Public school funding versus scholarship amounts

	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024
Total public school revenues	\$27.1 billion	\$28.4 billion	\$30.0 billion
Number of public school students	1,659,065	1,658,682	1,651,396
Public school revenue per pupil	\$16,333	\$17,117	\$18,183
Average scholarship amount (all programs)	\$7,384	\$7,625	\$6,521

Source: Public school enrollments and revenues are pulled from DEW's [downloadable files](#) ("Expanded List" and "Expenditure Rankings"), while average scholarship amounts are from *Advanced Reports*. **Note:** Total revenues for public schools includes state, local, federal and non-tax sources of funding; data from all public schools are included (traditional district, joint-vocational, and charter/STEM schools). The decline in the average scholarship amount in FY24 is due to the expanded EdChoice eligibility for high-income families who receive reduced scholarships.