

Russell R. Gifford
Testimony in Support of NESA Program
May 7, 2025

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram and Honorable members of the Senate Education Committee. It is a privilege for me to appear before you to express my support in establishing a Non-Chartered Educational Savings Account Program as included in the House version of the State Budget bill.

Previously in the 135th Assembly I gave proponent testimony on February 13, 2024 in support of HB339 before the Primary and Secondary Education Committee of the House and on December 3, 2024 I gave proponent testimony on SB304 before the Senate Education Committee. In the current legislative Assembly, I have given proponent testimony on SB68 before the Senate Finance Committee early this year on February 25, 2025.

My name is Russell Gifford and I reside in Ashtabula County. After my retirement as CEO of CNG Energy Services I served as Interim Chief Operations Officer of the Cleveland Municipal Schools for thirteen months. My wife and I opened Agape Christian Academy in September of 2005 as a Nonchartered, Non-Tax Supported School in Burton, Ohio. We are now in our 20th year of providing Preschool through Twelfth Grade education with two campuses located in Geauga County serving nearly 300 students.

Since our school opened, we have accepted no government funding for our school including for textbooks, computers, science laboratories, bus transportation, etc. We have done so to preserve our commitment to a quality education with a character-driven approach based on Agape's firmly held religious beliefs. These Biblical beliefs are integrated into our curriculum for Preschool to Twelfth Grade.

I would like to share two significant reasons why we are proponents of a Non-Chartered Educational Savings Account Program. First, it corrects an error that inhibits or denies a number of families from getting access to funding when selecting a school for their student's education.

You may recall that in 2023, HB 33 was adopted. In its introduction it was offered as a "universal" choice program implying it would give all families a chance for financial aid independent of what school was selected for their student's education. This is not the case because in the final adoption of HB 33 any family who chose a Nonchartered, Nonpublic (NCNP) school, which we are and have been since 2005, was excluded.

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However, it seems that the current Budget bill will enable all families, independent of the school they select, to have access to funding with the addition of an Educational Savings Account. We strongly believe all families should have greater control over their student's education at the school of their choice without being denied access to funds.

Nonchartered, Nonpublic schools like Agape generally hold deeply religious views and integrate Biblical values into their curriculum. The freedom these schools have has been clearly given in the Ohio Revised Code Section 3301.0732. The added requirement that the Treasurer of the State provide the ODEW with copies of Nonchartered Nonpublic schools annual recognized national standardized test results begins to reduce the freedom and separation the Ohio Revised Code had established from the ODEW.

Thank you again for the opportunity to express our support for expanding funding for families through the Educational Savings Account Program making funding available to Ohio families regardless of their choice of school.