

Russell Gifford  
Testimony in Support of SB68  
February 25, 2025

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hudson and members of the Senate Finance Committee. It is a privilege for me to appear before you to express my support for SB68 to establish the Non-Chartered Educational Savings Account Program.

My name is Russell Gifford and I reside in Ashtabula County. After my retirement as CEO of CNG Energy Services, my wife and I opened Agape Christian Academy in September 2005 as a Non-Chartered, Non-Tax Supported school in Burton, Ohio. We are now in our 20<sup>th</sup> year of providing Preschool through Twelfth Grade education with two campus locations in Geauga County serving nearly 300 students.

While Agape is not affiliated with a church, at the time we opened our school we had chosen to be a Non-Chartered, Non-Tax Supported school within Ohio Administrative Code 3301-35-08 due to our deeply held religious beliefs.

In the 135<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, I testified before the Senate Education Committee on SB 304. In the new session of this General Assembly the bill was re-introduced as SB68 which would create a Nonchartered Educational Savings Account Program.

Since our school opened in 2005, 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 truly held religious beliefs. These Biblical beliefs are integrated into our curriculum from Preschool to Twelfth Grade.

I would like to share three significant reasons why we are proponents of SB68. 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.

In 2023 HB33 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 HB33 any family who chose a Nonchartered, Nonpublic (NCNP) School, which we are and have been since 2005, was excluded.

Second, since Nonchartered, Nonpublic Schools generally hold deep religious views and they integrate Biblical values into their curriculum for Preschool through Twelfth grade, SB68 maintains this freedom which also exists in guidelines developed almost 50 years ago in the Ohio Administrative Code 3301-35-08.

Russell Gifford  
Testimony in Support of SB68  
February 25, 2025  
Page 2 of 2

Third, since we believe God has a plan for each of our students' lives, when a family chooses our school we provide additional opportunities for the student. We have a partnership with Auburn Career Center serving Geauga and Lake Counties. This allows a student to earn a diploma from Agape as well as graduate from Auburn with a specific vocational degree. We also offer a work study for seniors who have found a career they wish to pursue. The student is able to work 20 hours per week and graduate with at least the minimum number of credits required for graduation in the state of Ohio. Also for a family who desires their student prepare for college we offer College Credit Plus for our Ninth through Twelfth Grade students. This enables a student to gain college level class experience as well as earn college credits while attending high school.

We believe that all families should have access to an Educational Savings Account as provided in SB68 and thus expanding school choice. We also recognize the need for accountability and believe the best measure would be that families continue to decide on and remain at the school they believe provides the best education and absolute values in character, morality and behavior. As a monitor of a student's academic progress we annually administer a standardized nationally normed achievement test as well as using SAT and ACT college level testing.

In conclusion we are asking you to approve SB68 and pass it out of committee so that all families have greater control over their student's education at the "school of their choice" because they now would have access to funds which are currently not available to them.