

Martha Orbovich

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Driehaus, and members of the House Finance Committee:

My name is Martha Orbovich, and I am the mother of two boys -- a 15-year-old with ADHD and dyslexia, and a neurotypical 13-year-old. I'm also a special education advocate who helps parents obtain the services their children need in school. I'm grateful for this opportunity to speak to you today about why I believe in school choice.

When my older son, Milo, was 3, he could only say five words. After seeing a few specialists, he was diagnosed with a speech delay and entered our school district's special needs preschool program. This improved his speech and social skills significantly, although when he started kindergarten he remained on an Individualized Education Program so he could continue to receive speech services.

Once he entered kindergarten, I thought there was something more going on with him than just a speech delay, and he was diagnosed with ADHD. Then, in first grade, he still was not keeping up with his peers and was struggling with reading comprehension. I repeatedly asked the school folks if they could figure out what was going on with him and they repeatedly answered that these delays were typical. Finally, in his third grade year, they agreed to do a multi-factored evaluation and he was found eligible for special education services under the category of Specific Learning Disability. I, not having a clue what this meant, asked if he was dyslexic. "No, no," they assured me, "he's not dyslexic." But, he was, and always will be.

Milo had a wonderful second grade teacher who thankfully looped up to third grade with him. Despite her hand-holding, creativity, and openness to trying anything that might help him, as well as my support with homework and helping with uncompleted school work, he still struggled. He couldn't stay on task in the classroom and homework was a nightly frustration for both of us. At this point, my husband and I decided he would start off his fourth grade year at the wonderful place that is Marburn Academy.

If you're not already familiar with Marburn, it's a private school that specializes in teaching kids with ADHD and learning differences. The change in my boy that first year was amazing. He got in the car every day after school with a smile on his face, excited to tell me about his day. For the first time in a long time, perhaps ever, he knew what it felt like to succeed in school. Milo was finally being taught in a way that worked for him.

This isn't to say that our school district isn't a "good" district. It works well for my younger son, who's finishing his first year of middle school with reasonably decent grades. But for the kind of kid who, as my friend likes to say, doesn't wrap it up in a box with a pretty bow on top? Not so much.

Four years ago when I started reading in the Dispatch about the proposal that would become the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship, I joked that I would be the first person in line to apply.

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Indeed, we applied that first year and started receiving much appreciated financial help for the large tuition bill at Marburn.

However, even with the Peterson money, over \$10,000 remained our responsibility. And since that first year, Marburn's tuition has gone up, up, up, while the Peterson funds have stayed the same. Also, on a personal note, I became a single parent in 2014. Whereas the tuition was a luxury we could afford before, I now consider it a necessary burden. Milo's a freshman now. He's happy and well-adjusted and succeeding in school, and he wants to graduate from Marburn Academy. The increase in scholarship amounts that is proposed under HB64 would help make that a reality for my family, but many families would still be left behind with the current cap on scholarship funding of \$20,000 per year. Recommendations have been made to increase the cap to \$27,000 per year, and I want to lend my support to those who have advanced this change.

While some folks whose kids attend Marburn can afford the tuition with no problem, I think the majority are like me. In fact, thanks to the Peterson Scholarship, now there are many parents at Marburn who would have never had the opportunity to see the amazing things their kids can do when they are given the support and instruction that public schools can't, or won't, provide. I see this often, both as a Marburn mom and as an advocate for kids with learning differences.

When I think about where my son would be today if he'd remained in public school, (What kind of grades would he get? Who would his friends be? Would he be the happy, funny, and thoughtful young man he is now, or would he have gotten discouraged and given up?), I can say without exaggeration that Marburn Academy has been a life-changing experience for him.

Thank you again for your time and consideration today. I would be happy to answer any questions from the committee.