



Senate Education Committee
SB358 Support Testimony
September 23, 2020

Chair Lehner, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Education Committee, I am Susie Kaeser, a 41-year resident of Cleveland Heights and a long-time citizen advocate for public education. I am the education specialist for the League of Women Voters of Ohio. I appreciate the opportunity to share our concerns about the best way to proceed with testing and vouchers during this unusually challenging moment.

Guaranteeing all children access to high quality public education is one of the most important responsibilities of state government, and a direct way our state advances equal opportunity. During this difficult pandemic we must strengthen the success of our public schools and the students and communities that benefit from them. Our public schools are essential for socialization, academic engagement, and intellectual awakening; they are fundamental to the health and welfare of many of our neediest students; and they provide for child care, social services, nutrition, and child protection.

Our economy, our communities, and our children desperately need the multifaceted contributions of our public schools.

But at this moment, educators across the state are struggling to keep students and staff healthy, meet rising costs while experiencing resource losses, and to maintain some level of quality. It is hard. The state has left to local communities, responsibility for solving the problem so there is a wide range of solutions across the state. There is nothing uniform about public education today except that it is extremely challenging.

I have been a kindergarten tutor for the last 15 years, and when I contacted my host teacher about helping this year, she described how she cried through the first day of kindergarten on line. It is hard to guide our youngest students from afar. She like all of our educators, will make the best of it. I am struck by how hard our educators are straining to meet the needs of their students under extremely difficult circumstances yet it will fall short in too many places. Parents play a much bigger role in education when it is remote, and we are seeing significant differences in the kind of support children receive. This period, no matter how hard everyone is working, is clearly a time when education attainment will be uneven because the educational experiences will be uneven and unequal and may fall short.

There is no way to set a standard for what is an acceptable level of learning under these unusual circumstances and then to measure and judge the quality of education based on that standard.

Testing experts like Daniel Koretz are clear: it is a misuse of standardized tests to make high stakes decisions such as where to deduct funds for private school tuition. But even if one believed this is a fair measure, any legitimacy rests on students having an equal chance to learn. Under the unusual circumstances of COVID - 19 that equal opportunity does not exist. Any high stakes judgments would simply be unfair and would discriminate against students who lack support.

For these reasons it seems prudent to once again suspend the state's testing program and the use of the report card to judge schools, evaluate teachers, define EdChoice eligibility, or judge school district

performance as proposed in SB 358. We need to find our way through this unusual time together and without fear of failure.

SB 358 does not go far enough, however, when it comes to limiting the growth of vouchers in existing EdChoice school districts. School districts face the same financial uncertainty as the state's general fund. With the threat of even more cuts to state basic aid, it is hard to imagine how local school districts can absorb that loss and the full cost of every new voucher.

In my community which already carries one of the highest financial burdens for EdChoice, the bill increased from more than \$7 million for FY20 to \$9.1 million for FY21. The state contribution each year is \$1.8million. The district budget has had to fund the difference: \$5.2 million last year and \$7.3million this year. The community is being asked to fill the funding hole with a levy and students have already carried the weight of more than \$3.5 million reduction in funds over the last two years with another \$2 million expected in the year ahead. No district should have to reduce quality and raise taxes to stay even because of unfettered voucher costs over which they have no control.

EdChoice is driving significant funding inequality among districts. It is not fair to spare some communities through a safe harbor but allow the costs to grow in other districts. To make matters worse, the majority of EdChoice vouchers are awarded in districts with high poverty rates and serve children of color. It is both a financial and equity crisis.

We urge you to suspend the award of any new vouchers starting in February of 2021, and to reimburse Edchoice districts on a pro-rated basis for new voucher costs for this school year. The best way to offer equal protection to students across the state is to suspend awarding new vouchers until the state budget can adequately serve its public schools.

Over the last 20 years the Legislature has been exceedingly generous with the use of public funds to support private education but has not shown the same commitment to the public school system that is their Constitutional responsibility. The pandemic has revealed that our public resources are both limited and critical to serving public purposes. We must prioritize what is essential. And public education is essential.

Thank you for considering these ideas.