

Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony regarding H.B. 110. As an educator and taxpayer, I also want to thank you for the work that you do for our State and for the recent increase in EdChoice Expansion eligibility.

I am Sharla Elton, Superintendent of Heritage Christian School in Canton, Ohio. I am here today to ask for equitable funding for students using EdChoice and Jon Peterson scholarships. After the well-being of my students, this funding is the most critical issue to our school.

We have a beautifully diverse student body. This year, 43% of my students identified as black, 26% white, 18% multiracial, and 13% Hispanic. Six percent of our students are English language learners, double the rate of Canton City public schools.

If you want to consider needs, our free/reduced lunch rate is over 80% with 70.3% qualifying as free rather than reduced. We have a mental health agency named Pathway in our building with two counselors full-time. They report that 40% of our students have received a mental health consultation, and nearly one in four are receiving counseling with that agency alone. Compared to two public schools that Pathway also serves, Heritage has 10 x the consultations and more than double the open cases as a percentage of the total student body.

These are the children we are privileged to serve, and whose parents who have made the careful decision to place them in our school. They are amazing and brilliant. While I don't have recent state test scores due to covid, our children almost always beat the Canton City public school district in achievement across the board, and the other nonpublic voucher students in our area as well. Please come visit our campus to see us first-hand.

Sometimes we can make issues quite complicated. When distilled down, I propose that public education is:

- using taxpayer money
- to educate Ohio children
- in a body of knowledge defined by the State of Ohio as important.
- Rich children, poor children, all children get educated – making sure they have the knowledge to be successful citizens, and using tax money to achieve that goal.

We have a variety of fantastic settings where children can get an education. We have public schools, open enrollment public schools, charter schools, magnet schools, and non-public vouchers, all which give children a public education according to the Ohio learning standards, using taxpayer funding, and accountability through the Ohio state tests.

The public supports school choice. Democrat and Republican, Hispanic, Black and White, as you can see in the details in my written testimony.

- In a March 2021 Real Clear Opinion Research study, more than 800 voters were asked: “School choice gives parents the right to use the tax dollars designated for their child’s education to send their child to the public or private school which best serves their child’s

needs. Generally speaking, would you say you support or oppose the concept of school choice.”

- In the highest level of support yet, 71% said they support school choice.
- This includes 69% who identified as Democrat, and 75% who identified as Republican.
- Black respondents reported 66% support school choice, as well as 68% of Hispanic and 73% of white respondents.
- In another study of 1,200 respondents done in January 2021 from Democratic pollster Beck Research,
 - 65% of K-12 parents back school choice, including 66% of public-school parents.
 - The support increases to 72% when parent work full-time, and among middle and high school parents.
 - This study found 74% of African Americans favor school choice, as well as 71% of Latinos.
 - When asked about “school vouchers that allow low- and middle-class families to send their child to any school they deem best,” 74% backed school vouchers with this framing.
- Harvard Youth Poll of 18-29 year olds: “If parents had more freedom to choose where they could send their children to school, the education system in this country would be better.”
 - Agree: 49% compared to disagree 18% in 2021.
 - Ratio of agree to disagree is 2.7.
 - The percentage of young adults who agree increased 11% since 2019.

It seems that every other day I am getting a news alert about school choice being expanded in states across the nation. And school choice positively effects public schools too, which is awesome. We all want the best for all children.

Arizona Justice Clint Bolick said “The idea of school choice is spreading like wildfire around the country, because it’s the one education reform that puts real choices and real opportunities in the hands of families who desperately need them.”

This is good news, but I’d like to share some concerning numbers with you. According to the District profile report on the ODE website, Canton City public schools, where I am located, receives \$13,153 in state revenue per pupil (FY20.) Comparable districts get \$11,748 in Ohio. In comparison, the EdChoice voucher for my K-8 school pays \$4,650. How is that equitable? We are serving the same students, but we receive only one-third of the funding. It’s a \$8,500 difference per child.

What this means for me practically is that I have woefully underpaid teachers and staff. Every penny is spent in struggle. The Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020 Canton-Massillon Wage Estimatesⁱ shows the Annual mean wage for elementary school teachers is \$62,180 per year. In comparison, Heritage’s full-time teacher mean is \$27,725. My highest paid Master’s degree

teachers are in the low 30,000's. And this is for a very hard job, with full classes of children with many needs.

Every year, I have been committed to giving raises, even when the EdChoice payment seems as unmovable as a mountain. This is a great challenge, as costs increase with inflation, but my revenue does not. This means even my best raises are pretty pathetic, and sometimes the insurance premium increases eat it all and people take home even less money than the year before. I have laid awake at night wondering how I could make the numbers work if minimum wage gets a significant increase. My hourly staff average is \$11.18 per hour. Not one hourly employee makes \$15 per hour. Keep in mind; I have employees who have worked over 20 years at our school. This is what living on \$4,650 looks like.

Yet my amazing faculty and staff miraculously come to work every day with skill and dedication. After the Spring shut-down, we saw that many students were not thriving online. In June and July, we still rolled out our summer tutoring programs in-person at Governor DeWine's reduced class sizes. In August, we came back in-person 5 days a week. Because that is what our students needed. We also created a new online program for families who weren't ready to return at first. We have been in-person every day, all-year, with only a couple of interruptions. I am thankful to say we have only had 8 covid cases this year among faculty, staff, and students, and have no reports of any school transfer of covid because of their hard work.

Two weeks ago, I was in a federal funds conference. All funds are so important to us, and we want to make sure we make the most of every dollar, and do so correctly. I was thrilled to learn that ESSER funds could be used for building renovations to our 100-year-old former public school building, and also to give faculty and staff bonuses! Finally, I could reward my custodians, faculty, and staff for coming back, risking their lives to clean, teaching scared, and opening the school for one reason – because it was what students needed. I don't have any extra Heritage money to pay them for this huge sacrifice. But, I've been around long enough to know with every opportunity to ask, "us too?"

The speaker was quickly corrected. Building fixes and covid bonuses could only be given to public teachers and staff with ESSER funds. Not non-public. I am not an emotional person, but right there in my office, I cried for my team. Because they did everything those kids needed, scared, without a vaccine option, they came back and they taught, and cleaned, and answered the phones for parents. They make so little, and others who make so much more could get a bonus, but not them. Now, you can't change the many federal funding restrictions we have, but you can increase the voucher reimbursement. It is more than overdue.

Instead of having ceiling amounts that we beat upon, make vouchers equitable with other funding. Give us an equitable per pupil funding formula. But please don't keep us year after year at a small funding amount. Let's talk about some of the reasons why people may justify paying vouchers at a lower amount.

First, perhaps the state feels that \$4,650 or \$6,000 for older students is enough. If you do feel that \$4,650 is a proper amount per pupil, why not make the public schools and charter schools live

within that total of state and local funding also? If it is sufficient for us, it should also be sufficient for them.

Is our learning so different? The knowledge that Ohio students need are described in Ohio's Learning Standards. Both public and voucher students learn these standards, and both take the Ohio state tests to assess that learning. Both are subject to the third-grade reading guarantee and graduation requirements. If these are the key components of educating a child in Ohio that both types of students attain, then why is there such a stark compensation difference in the funding? Especially when our students typically do better on the state tests.

Some claim that vouchers deprive public districts of funding. But According to an April 22 article by The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, "...per-pupil funding has actually increased in districts where charters and private-school choice have been most prevalent."ⁱⁱ Also, "Yes, it's entirely appropriate for the legislature to reduce state funding when children exit a school district for whatever reason."ⁱⁱⁱ If any school doesn't have the responsibility to educate a child, they shouldn't receive the funding for that child.

One may argue that voucher schools are often non-profit and can offer tax-deductible donation opportunities. This is true. However, public schools can also have non-profit organizations (PTOs, etc.) to raise funds. Many public schools have received major donations for athletic facilities, supplies for students, technology, and more. They also have wider freedom to use their funding, and have more opportunities for governmental funding of facilities and other projects.

Another argument is that voucher schools have more flexibility in their educational models and more restrictive admission policies than public schools. But this is not the case. Magnet schools also have great flexibility in their educational models and can deny students based on selective criteria. One example is Portage Collaborative Montessori School in Canton, Ohio. They restrict enrollment to a very specific geographic area, and have other admission criteria. They use a very unique educational model that doesn't assign students to grades, and they have a curriculum approach very different from public schools. Yet, they receive the increased funding. Another magnet school designed for the arts also has selective enrollment into their arts school.

Perhaps when the voucher system was established, decision-makers reasoned that voucher students would make up only a small portion of the overall student body of a private school, and so the amount of compensation would not be significant. Or that private-pay parents would supplement the funding. On the contrary, the program has been very popular with Ohio families, and voucher students make up an increasing portion of student bodies in private schools across the state. Ohio parents love choice!

Furthermore, when taxpayers are funding the education of all children in Ohio, why would parents (taxpayers) be expected to further subsidize the education in one building versus another? Rather, if the decision makers have determined the appropriate amount needed from taxpayers to educate a child in the State of Ohio, shouldn't that amount be allocated to each child, regardless of the specific building chosen? Wealthier parents don't have to pay more than their taxes to subsidize the education of students in public, charter, and magnet schools. Why the difference? You do not see a payment disparity in other funding frameworks, such as the food

and nutrition program, publicly funded childcare, or Pell grants. In those programs, the funding follows the child, regardless of the institution chosen.

Maybe we are paid differently because that's just how it was done in the past. I don't have to tell you, that's not a very good reason not to change something that needs fixed.

In summary, the voucher payment amount is clearly not sufficient for the education of a student in Ohio. It does not allow teachers and school personnel to be compensated properly, and puts schools that serve parents using vouchers at a severe funding disadvantage.

ODE Superintendent DeMaria recently said at a conference that part of Ohio's strategic plan is to renew our focus on equity. I ask you to look at the inequitable funding situation in education, and remedy this issue in the upcoming biennial budget. Thank you for your time; I would be pleased to take any questions you have.

¹ https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_15940.htm#25-0000

² <https://fordhaminstitute.org/ohio/commentary/edchoice-lawsuit-deja-vu-all-over-again#:~:text=Over%20the%20past%20year%2C%20media,lawsuit%20against%20Ohio's%20EdChoice%20program.&text=In%20that%20case%2C%20the%20plaintiffs,deprive%20traditional%20districts%20of%20funding.>

³ <https://fordhaminstitute.org/ohio/commentary/edchoice-lawsuit-deja-vu-all-over-again#:~:text=Over%20the%20past%20year%2C%20media,lawsuit%20against%20Ohio's%20EdChoice%20program.&text=In%20that%20case%2C%20the%20plaintiffs,deprive%20traditional%20districts%20of%20funding.>