

Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony regarding H.B.110.

My name is Briana McMullins. I live in Cleveland Heights and I have two children in elementary school. My daughter receives the Autism Scholarship and my son started using the Jon Peterson Scholarship this school year. I am testifying because school choice has been a blessing to our family and I believe that it is a tool that will supply educational equity.

My children and I moved to Ohio from California in 2017. We initially lived with family in East Cleveland and they attended a nearby charter school. The school was a good fit at the time for my son, but my daughter had more learning needs that they were unable to adequately address. When I bought my first home the deciding factor between prospective houses was the public school that each home was assigned to. According to school report cards, the elementary school for the house that I ultimately chose was one of the best in the area. It is an IB school that teaches Spanish as a second language to all students. I was also told that public schools would have more support for children who have IEPs. Unfortunately, my high hopes were not met. My daughter continued to struggle tremendously in school. She was not retaining academic skills and she was having meltdowns in the classroom due to being overwhelmed. This is a common behavior that autistic children have. Her intervention specialist was amazing, and she took up as much time as she could with my daughter. However, my daughter's homeroom teacher was obviously frustrated with her. I could feel her frustration in 15-minute parent teacher conferences. I could only imagine how my daughter felt being in her class for multiple hours each day. I do not blame her teacher for being overwhelmed. My daughter does move more slowly than her peers and she needs more supports. It must be challenging to cater to a classroom of 25 students who all have their unique needs and strengths. One day, I decided to search online to see if there were any schools in the area that cater to children who have special needs. I found Julie Billiard. I scheduled a visit to one of their open house events and one thing led to another. I was concerned about the cost of my daughter attending their school, but they informed me of the Jon Peterson and the Autism Scholarships. They supplied financial aid to make the rest of the tuition that was not covered by the scholarship affordable, something that was particularly important to me as a single parent. I initially had reservations about the school as it is a Catholic school and we are protestant Christians. However, we felt welcomed. My daughter has attended Julie Billiard for two years now and she has grown tremendously in her academics and in her behavioral and social skills. Her school is entirely made up of staff who are trained in specialized education. I can tell the difference that having teachers who understand her makes.

Simultaneously to all that was occurring with my daughter, my son was also having issues in the new public school. He went from earning all A's in kindergarten at the charter school in East Cleveland to getting almost all F's in their new public school just a year later in the first grade. To make matters worse, I was never informed of his failing grades until I received his report card. He was not on track to meet the Third Grade Reading Guarantee and every time that I asked about interventions that were put in place to help him to improve his reading skills, I was given the runaround. This was concerning to me because such interventions are required by the State of Ohio. My son was bullied at the new school and he developed behavioral issues. In the first and second grade, he spent much of his time in the

principal's office missing instruction. At one point, my son and our family had a meeting with another student and her family as well as the school principal and a member of the board of education. The other student admitted that my son was bullied, and yet the principal continued to talk to him harshly and blame him for everything. He was 7 years old at the time. My son was diagnosed with ADHD by his pediatrician and began going to therapy. I asked that he be evaluated for an IEP because many of his behavioral challenges could be explained by his ADHD. The school psychologist and principal continued to refuse to evaluate him. At one point, they even brought in a member of the school board to fight my request of his evaluation. It is my understanding that this behavior is federally illegal. It wasn't until my son started to become suicidal at school that they decided to evaluate him. He was found to qualify for an IEP. He finished out the 2019-2020 school year online with IEP supports at the public school due to covid-19 precautions, but I felt extremely uncomfortable and unsafe having him return to school in person because of the experiences that he's had there. Some of the only adults that I trusted at that school were the same intervention specialist that my daughter had as well some lunch and recess attendants. I applied to multiple private schools in the area, but they all requested information from my son's prior school and denied him because of what the school reported. I went on a whim and reached out to St. Thomas Aquinas and they accepted him. I was hesitant to send my son to St. Thomas Aquinas because it is in a rougher part of inner-city Cleveland, but I decided to give it a shot. He has been in school in person the entire school year. They have accommodated his learning needs more than the public school ever did. He is in a general education classroom and he gets supports from an intervention specialist that the school contracts. His grades have risen back to A's and B's and he is a happy boy again.

I am not writing to disgrace public schools. Good public schools are important. I am a product of public schooling. However, I do not believe that one school environment can meet the needs of every unique child. My children happen to excel in their private Catholic schools. There are some children who do achieve more in a public-school setting or even a Montessori school. The issue is that families who can afford to pay for private schools do so when they see that public schools are not a suitable fit for their children. Less wealthy families often do not have that choice. Their children are stuck in a setting that does not meet their needs. Given that education is related to what many believe to be success, children in a school that is not right for them are more likely to continue the cycle of poverty. I personally pay my taxes on time every time that they are due. My children have the right to attend schools that meet their particular needs.

In my community alone, there are so many falsehoods spread about school choice and I wish that I could dispel them all, but for the sake of time I cannot do that now. School choice is a great asset to Ohio and Ohioan families. Many people ask why would I chose to leave the sunny state of California to come to Ohio. At one point I was homesick and considered moving back, but as a parent we do what is best for our children. The opportunity for my children to learn is a reason well worth being proud to call myself a Buckeye.

I am so grateful to the Ohio senate for funding the various school choice scholarships that this great state offers. I am humbly asking that these programs continue to be funded and available to all children who need them. Doing so will continue to help the citizens of this state both now and in the future.

Thank you, Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee for allowing me to share my family's story with you all. I so wished to speak with you all in person, but I had an operation that prevented me from doing so. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me so that I can give more clarification.

Briana McMullins

(619) 721-0329

Mcmullinsb@yahoo.com