



Interested Party Testimony

House Bill 110: Biennium Budget, FY2021-2023

Presented by Valley Christian Schools: Michael Pecchia, President

Wednesday, May 5, 2021

Chairman Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak to you this morning. My name is Michael Pecchia. I am the President of Valley Christian Schools. We are a chartered non-public K-12 school located within the Youngstown City School District serving approximately 700 students. A majority of our students participate in one of the four Ohio School Choice Scholarship Programs. On behalf of those students and their families, I want to thank you for your courage, compassion, commitment and conviction for making Ohio among the national leaders in school choice. I applaud your willingness to “give hope and a future” to, in many cases, the “least of these” in our society or the disadvantaged, disenfranchised and underserved educationally in our state.

As you may know, our city is among the poorest in the country. The latest census bureau figures rank Youngstown as the 2nd poorest city in the nation with a poverty rate of over 38%, and a child poverty rate of 57%. In addition the Youngstown City School District has been on the bottom of the state’s school report card and under state control for many years. The EdChoice and the EdChoice Expansion Scholarship Programs are giving hope to our families for a better life for their children, a life they know comes only with a good education. The Jon Peterson Special Needs and Autism Scholarship Programs give hope to families with special needs kids who know that “one size educational programs do not fit all.” Schools such as Valley Christian School are your hands extended as we embrace your vision to provide a high quality educational experience to all Ohio students.

Today I want to speak to you regarding two areas of concern and need; Equitable Funding for the scholarships and the scholarship application process.

The current Ed Choice scholarship amounts of \$4,650 for K-8 and \$6,000 for 9-12 have not been increased since 2015. Because we serve such an impoverished community we cannot charge more than the scholarship provides. I’m sure you would agree that the cost of rent, utilities, groceries and gas have not remained at the same levels as six years ago. Our total revenue per student is 50% less than that of the Youngstown City School District and our per-pupil expenditures are 45% less than what Youngstown City School District spends. Although we serve the same students, our families receive less per student than area charter schools as well. We are educating the same students for much less. Why do our students deserve less?

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Although mission and personal sacrifice are at the heart of what we do at Valley Christian Schools, our ability to attract and retain highly qualified teachers is affected by lack of equitable funding for scholarship programs. We have a staff of certified teachers that I would stack up against any school in our area, yet they teach at our school for significantly less than the salaries of their public-school counterparts. Although it is difficult for a school like ours to raise substantial funds to cover the gap between tuition and the true cost of education, we do our best. Schools like Valley Christian fill a much needed void in our educational system, and we do it at a fraction of the cost of some of our public schools. I submit to you today, that increasing the scholarship amounts is overdue and a great investment for the taxpayers of Ohio. Our students deserve it!?

Now, I would like to address the Ed Choice application process.

The current process for eligible families to apply for the scholarship is onerous and often times demeaning. Instead of allowing families to demonstrate eligibility based on approval for other state or federal programs, families must produce duplicate documentation. Although the Department of Education attempted to create the ability to upload documents, most families must mail hard copies to the Department, sometimes multiple times as documents sometimes are lost in the process. This year alone we still have nearly 30 scholarships not yet awarded for this schools year. Verification of residency is also messy with the Department allowing districts to take more than the 30 days allowed to review applications and require multiple documents for proof of residency. Parents wait months after they apply, sometimes six months or more for applications to be processed. Often times our families submit a utility bill as proof of residency only to have it rejected because of a past due notice which only serves to remind them of their status in society, the position they are striving to improve by sending their children to our school. I'm sure some of us can remember those days and are thankful we have found our way out, yet we continue to hold it against our most needy families.

In conclusion, I would like to once again thank you Chairman Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee for allowing me to provide testimony today on House Bill 110, the biennium budget for FY2021-2023. On behalf of our students and their families and the staff from Valley Christian Schools that serve them, I sincerely hope you will consider more equitable funding for the Ed Choice Scholarship programs and ensure a more simplified and dignified application process.

I would be happy to answer any questions you or the members may have.

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