



AMERICAN FEDERATION
for Children

House Bill 200 Testimony
House Education and Career Readiness Committee
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Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Slaby, and members of the committee. My name is Alyson Miles, and I'm the Deputy Director of Government Affairs for the American Federation for Children. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 200, a bill to create the Ohio Opportunity Scholarship.

The American Federation for Children (AFC) is a national advocacy organization, promoting school choice policies that empower parents to choose the best education program for their children. But what is school choice? It's providing options for children for where they will receive their education. It's recognizing that parents know what is best for their children and empowering them with the ability to choose from any educational option, whether it is a traditional public school, community school, private school, or through virtual or blended learning or home-schooling. It is recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach to education is outdated and leaves students behind. AFC's efforts focus on the students rather than the system.

Nationally, bipartisan support for school choice remains strong. In AFC's latest national survey, conducted by Democratic polling firm Beck Research, 68% of those polled indicated support for school choice, with 40% strongly favoring it. This is consistent with poll results from the last three years.

Support for School Choice (Support – Oppose)	
January 2017	68% - 28%
January 2016	70% - 24%
January 2015	69% - 27%

The question we asked was “Generally speaking, would you say you favor or oppose the concept of school choice? School choice gives parents the right to use the tax dollars associated with their child’s education to send their child to the public or private school which better serves their needs.” The poll was conducted January 2-5, 2017 of 1,100 likely voters. The margin of error was +/- 3.5%.ⁱ

Currently, there are 50 private school choice programs in 23 states and D.C. These programs are providing opportunities to parents and students to make a choice in their education. For many Ohio families, this is a choice they wouldn't otherwise have. Through these programs, students' lives are being changed for the better. For example, Andrea, a parent of a student using an Income-Based Expansion Scholarship, explains, "I want my kids to reach their potential... Working with the community, what I have learned is that education will provide the ticket out of poverty." ⁱⁱ

Clara, a parent of a student who used a Cleveland Scholarship, explains, "The Cleveland Scholarship has helped her finish school and have a diploma and now go to college. That is why the Cleveland Scholarship means a lot to me, because it has helped my kids to succeed and be someone in life." ⁱⁱⁱ

Two weeks ago, Walter Blanks, a current college student who benefitted from the EdChoice Scholarship, testified in support of this bill. He is currently a senior working on his bachelor's degree in journalism, and as he explains, "If you would have told me maybe six or seven years ago that I would be in a place where I am... I would not have believed you." Walter and his mom have talked about how he did not fit in at his assigned school; he was unable to focus in class, was always causing trouble, and wasn't learning. To Walter, "the EdChoice Scholarship means a second chance." ^{iv}

Despite the long history of support for school choice in this state, there are still too many children sitting in classrooms who are not eligible for our current programs and need a different environment to learn. House Bill 200 addresses this issue and makes changes to the eligibility requirements so families in need of a change will have that option.

House Bill 200 combines Ohio's three non-special needs scholarship programs into one income-based program called the Ohio Opportunity Scholarship. Students in families that meet the income requirements may choose to apply for a scholarship and use it towards tuition at a private school. Any remaining funds from the scholarship will be deposited into an education savings account. The substitute bill caps the program at 60,000 students.

Our current non-special needs programs are the Cleveland Scholarship & Tutoring Program, the EdChoice Scholarship Program, and the Income-Based Expansion Program. The Cleveland Scholarship & Tutoring Program provides scholarships to attend a private school to any student living in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. The EdChoice Scholarship is a performance-based program that offers students in our lowest-performing public schools the option of attending a private school. A student is eligible if he or she is assigned to a public school that meets specific performance conditions listed in statute. The list of lowest-performing schools has not been updated the last few years because of safe harbor. The Income-Based Expansion Program provides scholarships to students who are not eligible for the EdChoice or Cleveland programs and whose family income is at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines. This program is being phased-in over time, with a grade added each school year. This fall, this program will serve students in grades K-4.

The move to an income-based only program is the step in the right direction for Ohio. Our current programs, while great stepping stones for school choice in this state, leave many students in low and middle income families behind. Under HB 200, any student whose family income is at or below 400% of the federal poverty guidelines (FPG) is eligible for at least a partial scholarship. It is important to note that the bill proposes a tiered system for scholarship amounts, so families at the 400% level will not receive a full scholarship. Under the bill, families at 200% of FPG (family of 4 = \$49,200) will receive a full scholarship: K-8 students receive \$5,000 and 9-12 students receive \$7,500. Students at 400% will receive half of this: K-8 students receive \$2,500 and 9-12 students receive \$3,750.

No longer will students from our low and middle income families be prohibited from going to a school that best fits their needs because they don't live in Cleveland or their school is doing just well enough to stay off the EdChoice list or their children are in grades not yet served by the Income-based Program. No longer will schools need to be labeled "failing" for parents to have a choice in where their children attend school. All Ohio students are required to attend school, but we shouldn't simply want them to attend, they also need to learn. If a student is in a school where they are not learning, they should have a choice to go somewhere else, regardless of how well their assigned school is doing. HB 200 puts the children first.

Another change in the bill that is needed in Ohio is the move to a direct-funded program. This is a much needed change for these programs. These scholarships will be paid for out of the foundation funding appropriation rather than through a separate line item or through the "deduct and transfer" model. The direct-funded model focuses funding on the student rather than a particular school.

Another provision in this bill is to create an education savings account (ESA). ESAs are programs that provide funding to parents to customize their child's education and address their child's learning needs. HB 200 proposes a hybrid approach to ESAs: Opportunity Scholarships will be used first for tuition, and any remaining funds will be rolled into an account for future education expenses. A change made in the substitute bill is to limit the use of these funds to K-12 expenses only. Parents may spend these ESA dollars on education services such as tuition at a private school, tutoring services, and online learning programs.

Lastly, I would like to address accountability. HB 200 has several statutory accountability components:

- Requires scholarship recipients to take state assessments
- Scholarship recipients must keep receipts of ESA expenditures for five years
- ODE must compile and disaggregate student performance data and post online
- Value-Added scores for scholarship students will be calculated
- Allows Auditor of State to audit ESAs and disqualify students for misspent funds

Additionally, parents are the most important accountability factor. If parents are unhappy with the education their children are receiving at a private school, they'll send them somewhere else. No one is forcing parents to use a scholarship or send their children to a private school, and with more options available, parents will be the driving force in how students are educated, leading to innovation and improvements for all schools.

Conclusion

Leaving a public school is not for everyone, but the choice to leave should be. Educational choice is about having options for a student's education and ensuring that those options are funded. It is important to empower parents with the opportunities to choose the best type of program for their children.

Walter, the former EdChoice student, has said, "You fought for me before you even knew me." As you work on this bill, I urge you to fight for these students, even though you don't know them. Give them the option to choose where to go to school.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 200 and for your hard work for Ohio's students. AFC and I look forward to working with you on the bill and to strengthen Ohio's school choice programs. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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AFC YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/SchoolChoiceWorks>

ⁱ <https://www.federationforchildren.org/poll-public-support-school-choice-remains-strong-supportive-federal-movement-increase-school-choice/>

ⁱⁱ School Choice Ohio YouTube page: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJfreCrLHs>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.scoho.org/home/success-stories/>

^{iv} School Choice Ohio YouTube page: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MYFrG4QAnA&t=161s>