

Good afternoon Chair Bird, Vice Chair Fowler-Aurthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee. My name is Ben Douglass, I'm a pastor who has lived in the Central Hilltop neighborhood of Columbus for well over a decade. I now serve as the board chairman of Westside Christian School, a diverse private Christian school we started last year to give the kids and their families in the Hilltop a choice.

For me, and for my family this is a personal topic. I went to public schools, and so we sent our oldest daughter to the public school in our neighborhood starting in kindergarten. My wife was heavily involved in the school volunteering the classrooms and leading the PTA there.

Yet in second grade we hit a wall. Our daughter was miserable at school. We didn't understand what she was going through. We wrestled and prayed about what to do for her. We decided for 3rd grade we would transfer her to a Christian school using the EdChoice scholarship we qualified for. When we told her this she broke down and told us: there were kids acting out, flipping over desks, cussing out teachers, and day after day there was drama, distraction, and a lack of academic rigor. She felt bored, unchallenged, uncomfortable from the tension in the classroom. I remember her crying in bed, pulling the covers over her head, and begging us not to send her to school. It ripped our hearts out.

We decided that we to pull her now and not wait until third grade, so we put her in an online school starting in January of 2nd grade. We were shocked and frustrated how far behind she was. She struggled to catch up with the standards she had not been exposed to. When she started in 3rd grade at the Christian school, again she was behind. The academic rigor of the Christian school far outstripped the online school and was lightyears ahead of the public school she had been part of.

Her story is not unique. As a pastor who worked for 13 years with teens and children, I have seen countless kids who were struggling academically at all levels, year after year. I've heard of trauma and drama at the middle and high school level year after year, in environments that I would never recommend for any kids.

This past year I've seen a middle school student who was passed when he had failing grades, who can't read, and was himself shocked that they passed him on. I've seen a high school student who felt so defeated that Derek dropped out of school his freshmen year. I've seen a bright student, Alicia who graduated with good grade and then failed out of college in the first semester, when I know in my heart with the right school preparation Alicia could easily sail through college. I had one young man, Jason, who begged me to help him not go to the assigned high school, and so I tried to get him into a Christian school. He had a 3.4 GPA, was on the basketball team, and a great kid in hard circumstances. But when we had finished all the prerequisites, I found out that his standardized test scores were 8% and 20% on math and reading and they said he was too far behind. How can a kid who has a 3.4 GPA and thinks he's doing great actually be doing so poorly? He dropped out. Our kids and their families are being lied to in many large, city public schools, and these families have no idea, our family was one of them.

Every child in Ohio deserves the opportunity to find a school that works for them. Parents and guardians who know their kids and love them, know what's best for their children. The rich should not be the only ones who can give their children choice. Hard working Americans of every income and sector of work deserve the freedom to be able to put their kids in schools that work for them. The Backpack Bill will put choice in parents' hands where it should be.

As the board chairman of Westside Christian School, I've got to witness the difference the EdChoice can make for kids who are struggling. We received kids in 1st and 2nd grade that didn't know their alphabet or the sounds. One student has been sent to school after school, but now that he's here at WCS, because of the EdChoice, he says, 'Now I like going to school.'

We have the ability here and now to change the trajectory of kids' futures by giving them and their families choices if we will pass the Backpack Bill. This is not a political issue, this is an issue of doing what's best for every child and their family by giving them the freedom to choose the education that fits best for their child's needs. Parents know what's best for their kids.

Today my daughter is flourishing at the private Christian school. She's blowing the standardized test out of the water, she's happy, she's got friends, and her suffering has birthed a school for other kids like her. Please give every family choice. Thank you for your time.