

Good afternoon Chair Bird, Vice Chair Fowler-Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee. My name is Omar Tarazi. I am an attorney with over a decade working with charter schools and chartered nonpublic schools, and I am a member of Hilliard City Council. Thank you for allowing me to share my perspective on HB11 the Backpack Bill:

The school model which works for a population of middle-class students is completely different than the model for majority economic disadvantaged families. Middle class students come to school with a package of life experiences, vocabulary, role models, and values. They have parents who model holding stable jobs, eat balanced meals, have high hopes for their kids and take them on vacations, the zoo and museums. It is not hard to give these students a rigorous curriculum and prepare them for college.

In contrast, economic disadvantaged students do not share the same story, but most share a unique combination of difficulties distinct and often unimaginable to the typical middle-class student. What do you do with a population of students with no hope, no good role models, few positive life experiences, far behind academically, often suffering from PTSD, with parents who are either working, absent, or in jail. To be effective the school must meet the often broken and economically struggling family population at the level they are and build a community/village around the school on a moral value structure.

The current public-school model has been an abject failure at meeting this challenge despite the significant funds spent. For example, Columbus City, Akron, and Cincinnati public schools all spend about \$20K per student and still 70% of their student population cannot pass state proficiency standards. East Cleveland City schools achieves a 14% proficient rate after spending about \$32K per student. It is not that the teachers and administrators in these schools are not competent or caring, it is that they are trapped in an education model that does not allow them to succeed with the student population they have.

Chartered non-public schools are the most natural fit to meet this challenge because of their focus on building community around religious moral values, but charter schools and even the occasional public school can accomplish the same with the right flexible and passionate leadership willing to do whatever it takes for their families to succeed.

Currently, 21,800 students receive an income based EdChoice voucher to go to a chartered non-public of their choice, while almost 400K failing economic disadvantaged students continue to attend failing public schools. Why do they not take advantage of the voucher they are already qualified for?

The problem is not a lack of demand, but a lack of supply. Most non-public charter schools already have a waiting list let alone have the space for an influx of 400K new low-income voucher students. A \$5,500 voucher is below the cost to teach a student let alone pay for all of the start up costs of expanding facilities. Those facilities are increased through the generous donation of middle-class families who have been squeezed in every direction and pay in full for tuition of their own children. Those families need relief to be able to afford to make the

donations to expand the capacity for high quality non-public charter schools to accept additional students.

The Governor proposes to increase the eligibility criteria for EdChoice vouchers from 250% of the poverty line to 400% and allocates an extra \$65.8 million dollars for all scholarship programs to do it. If 100% of this extra money went to EdChoice vouchers, it would fund an additional 10,785 students.

Senate Bill 11 extends EdChoice voucher eligibility to all students, and the Legislative Services Commission estimates that if the 90,000 chartered nonpublic students currently attending without a scholarship receive a scholarship it would cost the state an additional \$528 million (462 million over the governor's budget). The bill also proposes increasing the tax credit for homeschool expenses from a maximum of \$250 to \$2,000. The Backpack Bill (HB 11) covers homeschool and private school students so it represents more than a \$600 million budgetary increase over the Governor's proposed budget.

We need more chartered non-public schools to help fill a huge need for community and moral structure that public schools are not designed to build. To accomplish this, the backpack bill is the most generous, and the most cost-conscious approach is Senate Bill 11 at \$462 million. There are many places to look for in the budget to find this money.

For example, in the governor's proposed budget there is \$194.1 million in new funds for School Resource Officers (SRO). While we 100% agree that school resource officers are the gold standard for school safety, their presence is not an economic choice, but one driven by political ideology. Columbus City Schools and Worthington City Schools, for example, got rid of their School Resource Officers for political reasons and hired instead Safety and Security staff with former law enforcement experience. So with this reality, it is not clear that \$194.1 million dollars of state funds for SRO's would add value and that money could cover EdChoice Vouchers for 32K students. If the full \$462 million additional funds are unavailable to be allocated for budgetary reasons, then take the amounts available and create a fixed number of vouchers to be divided with a priority given for low-income families.

Another option is to consider the fairness of the school funding formula as it relates to school choice. Let us say 10,000 students switch from urban failing public schools which spend \$20K per student to chartered non-public schools with an EdChoice Voucher. Those districts were spending \$200 million to fail to educate those students, and because of the transfer and the funding formula they will receive only \$68.5 million less dollars in state funds according to the LSC. This means they will be rewarded with having an extra \$131 million dollars for 10K students who no longer attend there. If we take this to the extreme, imagine all 45,000 Columbus Public School students take an EdChoice voucher to go somewhere else, the district would still be spending almost 600 million in tax dollars to teach zero students. To correct for this unfairness, consider phasing in a reduction of double the state foundation money for every student who transfers with a voucher to a chartered nonpublic school.

A few additional recommendations:

- 1- Add to SB1 a requirement that the new Director of Education conduct a study and produce a report for best practices for management, training, and discipline for school buildings serving majority populations of economic disadvantaged students.
- 2- Incentivize career technical training collaborations with school buildings with majority economic disadvantaged populations to provide hope and work pathways for those students.
- 3- Consider taking over failing public school buildings and offering them for lease to charter schools and chartered non-public schools with a track record of success with majority economic disadvantaged populations.

Sincerely,

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