



Education

Testimony to the Senate Higher Education Committee on Amendment 1735 to Substitute House Bill 9

Piet van Lier

Good morning Chair Kunze, Vice Chair Gavarone, and Ranking Member Williams and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee. My name is Piet van Lier and I am the education researcher for Policy Matters Ohio, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute with the mission to create a more prosperous, equitable, sustainable and inclusive Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony regarding Ohio's EdChoice school voucher program.

Thank you also for your efforts to limit the damage to our state's public school districts from the recent changes to EdChoice. It's clear that a quick, short-term fix is needed.

Based on media reports, the EdChoice amendment before you would freeze the number of voucher-eligible public schools at 517, the number designated as eligible under current law for this academic year, which ends in June. This freeze would last through the next two academic years, 2020-21 and 2021-22, and is a significant improvement over current law, under which the number of voucher-eligible public schools is set to rise next year to 1,227.

We are concerned, however, that the amendment also proposes broadening family eligibility for EdChoice income-based vouchers, a separately funded statewide voucher program. This aspect of the amendment works against the goal of the freeze and should be abandoned.

Current law sets eligibility for first-time voucher applicants at or below 200% of the federal poverty guideline. The proposed amendment would increase that to families at or below 300% of the poverty level, or \$78,600 for a family of four; families earning 350% of poverty would be eligible for 75% of the voucher value; those earning up to 400% of poverty (\$104,800 for a family of four) would be eligible for 50% of full voucher value.

The income-based EdChoice voucher was created specifically for low-income families, and this change would dramatically alter its purpose. We ask that this change not be made.

Finally, there is an important remedy missing from this proposal. Policymakers should hold school districts harmless for increased voucher deductions that happen during the current school year. This increase will cost districts about \$35 million more than last year, according to state finance reports. The legislature should appropriate sufficient funds to shield districts from the unexpected damage Ed Choice has inflicted this year, and provide similar protection over the next two school years.

A prime example of the kind of budget crisis that the increase has caused can be seen in the Cleveland Heights-University Heights school district, where this year more than \$7 million will be deducted to pay for vouchers from state foundation aid, a dramatic increase from previous years and a third of the state foundation funding that flows to the district.

Public education forms the bedrock of strong communities. EdChoice has weakened that foundation for years, but this year the voucher program has created an immediate funding crisis. Legislators are rightly concerned and should be applauded for taking quick action to soften the blow for our public schools and the students and families they serve.

If the legislature cannot agree on these issues – substantially reducing the number of voucher-eligible public schools, maintaining current income eligibility for the income-based vouchers, and holding districts harmless for the increased deductions – this committee should push to delay the February 1 start of the EdChoice application period, giving the legislature time to craft a sound proposal.

In the longer term, lawmakers should substantially restructure the EdChoice program to limit the damage it does to public schools. But public school districts are facing a crisis now, and state policymakers must act.