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**Testimony on EdChoice Vouchers
HB 9 Conference Committee
Thursday, February 13, 2020**

Chairman Jones and Members of the Conference Committee,

My name is Scott DiMauro. I serve as President of the Ohio Education Association (OEA). On behalf of our 122,000 members, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the EdChoice Voucher Program.

The problems with the current EdChoice program are well documented. The number of districts that have school buildings eligible for vouchers has increased from 40 to 139 over the last year. The problem will only get worse if the legislature fails to act. Next school year more than 1,200 buildings in over 400 districts will have buildings that are labeled “failing” and will be eligible for vouchers based on flawed report cards.

This has serious financial implications for public school students across the state because EdChoice performance-based vouchers are funded through deductions from local school districts. Approximately 90% of Ohio’s students attend public schools. In the current budget, formula funding to districts was flat. Higher voucher deductions from state aid has real implications such as larger class sizes, reduced curriculum offerings and increased pressure on local taxpayers.

Both the House and Senate have passed separate bills to address the issue - HB 9 (as passed by the Senate) and SB 89 (as passed by the House). The practical question facing us is which plan do we believe represents the best path for moving forward? OEA supports SB 89 as passed by the House, as it would move away from voucher eligibility based on flawed report cards and towards a program that funds vouchers directly by the state rather than deducting for aid to public schools.

The Senate-passed version of House Bill 9 would reduce the number of schools eligible for traditional EdChoice vouchers by exempting buildings rated A, B or C and those with a D that are not in the lowest 20% on the performance index indicator. That change would be for the next three years and would reduce the number of eligible buildings for the 2020-21 school year from over 1,200 to 425. The bill also would make a permanent increase in the eligibility level for the statewide income-based voucher to 300% of poverty.

OEA is opposed to HB 9 as passed by the Senate as it would permanently expand the statewide income-based voucher program while only providing a temporary change to performance-based eligibility. New traditional EdChoice vouchers based on flawed report cards would continue. Deductions to local school districts would continue to grow.



Senate Bill 89 as passed by the House would rename the existing income-based EdChoice program as the “Buckeye Opportunity Scholarship” and set the income threshold at 250% of the federal poverty. Applicants would be rank-ordered based on income, so lower income families would get priority in cases where appropriations aren’t sufficient to fund all qualifying applicants. This would be the main voucher program moving forward. However, SB 89 grandfathered current EdChoice voucher recipients. New performance-based vouchers would largely cease to be awarded except for siblings of some current recipients.

Going forward, SB 89 would set state funding of vouchers as the default option. Beginning with the 2021-2022 school year, a student who received a performance-based voucher the previous year but whose family income qualifies the student for the income-based program would be transferred to that (state-paid) voucher program.

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention other provisions of the SB 89 worthy of support – chief among them are a provision that would dissolve academic distress commissions and restore local control to Lorain, Youngstown and East Cleveland. Additionally, the bill would establish a study committee to look at the related education issues such as state testing and report cards; perform cost studies related to school funding; and sunset a provision related to school district territory transfers.

I urge the members of this committee and our legislative leaders to come to a resolution on this issue. We’re all aware of the ticking clock. In OEA’s view, the language in SB 89 as passed by the House represents the best path forward. SB 89 moves away from the blame game of a “failing school” model; maintains support for current voucher recipients through grandfathering; orients the program towards one that puts Ohio’s neediest families first in line; and moves toward direct state funding of vouchers to preserve funding that supports Ohio’s public school children.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I’d be happy to respond to questions from the committee.