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Media contacts at end of release

Public school leaders support House changes to EdChoice voucher program

COLUMBUS — Public education leaders from across Ohio met today at a Statehouse news conference to support legislation that would put an end to laws that force public school districts and their taxpayers to pay for private school tuition. That legislation, Senate Bill 89, would implement an income-based-only model for the Educational Choice Scholarship (EdChoice) Program, sunset problematic territory transfer provisions and remove three northeastern Ohio school districts from state control by dissolving academic distress commissions.

Under the current EdChoice program, a student is eligible for a voucher if his or her public school building is considered underperforming and a “failing school” based on the state’s flawed report card system. The number of buildings deemed “failing” has exploded over the past two years: from 255 in the 2018-2019 school year to 1,227 buildings for the upcoming 2020-2021 school year. The financial implications for school districts across the state are colossal.

“Common sense tells us that Ohio does not have over 1,200 ‘failing’ school buildings,” said Jennifer Hogue, Ohio School Boards Association director of legislative services. “The situation is especially suspect given that some of the ‘failing schools’ on the eligibility list have overall grades of A, B or C. Allowing this program to continue as is sends a powerful message of failure. Yet Ohio’s public school system is not failing. On the contrary — our public school districts and the students they educate are constantly improving.”

Barbara Shaner, advocacy specialist for the Ohio Association of School Business Officials, said, “Some districts are suddenly losing millions of dollars to the voucher program because of recent changes in law. High school students who already were attending a private school and paying their own tuition now have their tuition paid by the local school district at an annual rate of \$6,000 per student. The loss of these funds impacts students who remain in public schools, because it forces district officials to make cuts that reduce services and opportunities for their students.”

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“Community members who supported local tax levies for their school districts were not told their property taxes would be used to subsidize private school tuition,” stated Kevin Miller, director of governmental relations for the Buckeye Association of School Administrators. “Those community members intended for their tax dollars to support their local public schools. A recent poll conducted by the National School Boards Action Center found that 73% of voters oppose public funding being used for private, religious and home-school education.”

Senate Bill 89 would end the practice of awarding private school tuition vouchers based on a flawed report card system and paid for by school districts. Instead, vouchers would be awarded to students solely based on family income, the priority being those students most in need. The costs for this income-based program, called the Buckeye Opportunity Scholarship program, would be covered by the state. It would remove the program’s reliance on a flawed report card system that currently punishes districts, and local communities would no longer be required to subsidize private school tuition.

Media contacts:

Will Schwartz, Ohio School Boards Association deputy director of legislative services

Phone: [\(614\) 540-4000](tel:6145404000)

Email: wschwartz@ohioschoolboards.org

Barbara Shaner, Ohio Association of School Business Officials advocacy specialist

Phone: [\(614\) 325-9562](tel:6143259562)

Email: barbaracshaner@gmail.com

Kevin Miller, Buckeye Association of School Administrators director of governmental relations

Phone: [\(614\) 846-4080](tel:6148464080)

Email: miller@basa-ohio.org