**Legislator message version #1**

Dear (Senator/Representative) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_:

Twenty-two years ago, the Supreme Court of Ohio ruled that the state's method for funding public education was unconstitutional. Over the past two decades, legislators have struggled with how to fully fund the free and appropriate education to which all Ohio children are entitled.

Lately, however, it seems as though our state’s elected officials are focusing on ways to divert dollars away from traditional public school systems at the expense of our local taxpayers. While measures such as the state funding cap and flat foundation funding continue to shift the burden of paying for public education to the local level, other initiatives such as community school funding formulas and the implementation of private school vouchers are eating away at both state foundation funds and the local revenue approved by our residents.

I’m sure you are aware of the questions, many of which are being asked by your colleagues at the Statehouse, regarding State Report Card methodologies. It does not make sense that the main criteria for awarding vouchers and taking money away from public schools are based upon a state grading system that independent authorities, along with many of our legislators, have acknowledged as flawed.

Given the negative impact the measures noted above already have had on traditional public school systems, the expansion of the EdChoice voucher program either needs to be halted immediately or the state should provide an appropriation to pay for any new vouchers approved during the current biennium. Absent this, I fear the potential repercussion around the state will create additional issues requiring state intervention on a scale much greater than if our legislators address the faults of this plan now. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

**Legislator message version #2**

Dear (Senator/Representative) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_:

The state’s continued efforts to divert dollars away from traditional public school systems at the expense of our local taxpayers is unconscionable. Public awareness of these matters, such as how locally-voted tax dollars are being siphoned to pay for charter school students, as well as the negative impact of the state funding cap, is growing.

Having just passed a combined bond issue and operating levy in November, we’ve had ample opportunity over the past two years to engage our community and share with them some of the inner working of school funding. Needless to say, their eyes have been opened and they are quite shocked at how our funding is negatively affected by some of the recent legislation authored, sponsored and approved by their state elected officials.

Now, on the heels of November’s election, comes flat foundation funding and the expansion of the EdChoice voucher program. There is concern among many educators that this combination will deal a potential deathblow to several school districts around the state. If legislators do not stop the expansion of EdChoice, then the least that should be done is for the state to fully fund any new vouchers awarded during this state budget cycle, and to hold public schools harmless while doing so.

Legislative outreach by professional associations, school leaders, and lobbyists is to be expected. However, it appears that a general awareness of recent legislative activities is building at the grass roots level in communities around the state. In fact, during community engagement efforts leading up to our November levy request, voters were incredulous when they heard that recent legislative actions have kept millions of dollars away from “capped” districts such as Westerville, and how locally approved revenue is being diverted from communities to pay for other state education initiatives.

Given this growing awareness, we already have been approached by the group of community activists who worked to pass our November ballot issue. They now wish to remain active until we are on the ballot again in a few years, with a focus on informing voters about legislators’ continued efforts to shift the burden of paying for public education to local communities, and how locally approved funds are being diverted by legislators through things like the charter school funding formula and the private school voucher initiative.

Needless to say, this group’s passion for such work only grew when one of your colleagues stated that public schools knew voucher expansion was coming for several years and “just didn’t do anything about it.” Public school supporters view the comment as an insult to teachers, principals, and other educators who have dedicated their lives to this profession. Our local group is well aware of the efforts that we have made to improve, and they plan to help grow the electorate’s understanding of other critical factors at play, such as the flawed report card metrics being used for voucher eligibility, years of the state underfunding public school districts because of artificial caps, and how the state is diverting locally-voted tax dollars from public schools. We admire their ambition and intend to support them in their efforts.

Sincerely,

**Legislator message version #3**

Dear (Senator/Representative) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_:

The state’s recent expansion of EdChoice vouchers, combined with flat foundation funding, will be devastating to the financial stability of public school systems across Ohio. The ripple effect of these measures is likely to be far reaching as well. As someone who is greatly concerned about this matter, I encourage our legislators to take the following measures to prevent the problems that they are creating:

* It only takes a grade of D or F in one report card component for a school to become EdChoice eligible. The current report card is flawed, so until the report card is fixed, buildings should have two or more components with D or F grades before qualifying as EdChoice eligible.
* For students who qualify for both EdChoice voucher programs, the default program is the building performance-based version. This means the payments are deducted from school district’s state aid. The default program for students who qualify for both should be the income-based voucher program funded by the state.
* School districts were granted “safe harbor” options as the state implemented new report cards, testing changes, and performance standards. Safe harbor included suspending EdChoice eligibility, but now that the safe harbor has ended, improvements gained by districts during those years are no longer considered when determining EdChoice eligibility. The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) should again acknowledge performance improvement during the safe harbor years (2014-2015, 2015-2016, 2016-2017) and use that data to determine EdChoice eligibility.
* Remove the K-3 Literacy measure from EdChoice eligibility criteria. This measure only reflects the progress of students who are not yet on track for meeting the Third-Grade Reading Guarantee. A small fraction of these students can trigger an entire building to become EdChoice eligible, despite the majority of third graders meeting the standard by the time they are to be promoted to fourth grade. We received a D on the last report card for K-3 literacy despite 99.1 percent of our students meeting Third Grade Reading Guarantee requirements for promotion to 4th grade.
* EdChoice eligibility should be based on data from three consecutive school years instead of two of the most recent three years. Schools that have improved, or that have one year when performance slipped but overall performance continues to improve, are being punished by this criterion.
* EdChoice eligibility continues to be measured by the state’s old method for calculating value added scores; it is not based upon improvements that HB166 made to the value-added scores on district/building report cards. Legislators approved HB166 because they concluded that the old law was unfair. ODE should recalculate the overall grades and value-added grades based upon HB166 for the school years that will affect EdChoice eligibility.
* As clarified in HB 166, high school students no longer have to be enrolled in their public school district to qualify for an EdChoice voucher. This change takes money from school districts that never received state aid for those students. Legislators should reverse the language in HB 166 to require high school students to attend a public school in the year prior to applying for an EdChoice voucher, as currently required for grades K-8.
* Any building receiving an overall grade of A, B or C should not become subject to EdChoice eligibility and should be removed from the eligibility list. Overall building grade is already being used to exempt high performing buildings from some EdChoice eligibility triggers.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration of these recommendations. Given the negative impact voucher expansion will have on traditional public school systems, the program should be halted and corrected immediately. If it is not, at a minimum the state should provide an appropriation to pay for any new vouchers approved during the current biennium.

Sincerely,