

Centerburg Superintendent Mike Hebenthal: Here's the Problem with Vouchers

Superintendent Mike Hebenthal is a passionate advocate of the public common school system, and thus, opposes the privatization of the system. Attached is his thoughtful and compelling Letter to the Editor published in the Knox Pages.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR | knoxpages

Here's the problem with vouchers

Mike Hebenthal, superintendent of Centerburg Schools | March 15, 2022

Currently the "Backpack Bill" is being debated in the Ohio House of Representatives.

This bill is more commonly known as the school voucher bill. This bill would give each child in Ohio a voucher worth a certain amount to pay for their education. These funds can be used at any charter or private educational institution.

On the surface, it may seem like a good idea.

Creating a system of competition incentivizes innovation and usually helps produce better products at lower prices. Like all legislation, the devil is in the details.

For a competitive market to take place all things need to be equal. If one business is forced to operate in a way that costs more than its competitor then there is no competition and one ceases to exist. Unfortunately, the legislation, as written, funds all schools equally through vouchers but creates a terribly unequal system.

There are at least three issues that must be addressed for this legislation to be effective.

First is acceptance of all students. The way the legislation is now, a private school can refuse to accept a student for any reason they wish. If the student is disabled, a disciplinary problem or is suffering from mental health issues then the private schools can (and currently are) refusing enrollment. If after the student is enrolled and doesn't meet the academic requirements, then they are "involuntarily disenrolled."

This happens now where private and charter schools "involuntarily disenrolls" a student due to problems. Centerburg spends about \$9,200 per student. This is an average. We currently have some students that cost over \$60,000 a year to educate due to unusual issues and other students that cost closer to \$7,000 a year.

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It wouldn't take long for public schools, which are not legally allowed to deny enrollment and required to accept the voucher to buckle under high-cost students while the lower cost students attend private schools.

If you don't think this would happen, I refer you to recent testimony by Rep. Marylin John and Rep. Riordan McClain, sponsors of the legislation.

They were asked by Rep. James Hoops what would happen to a student in a private or parochial school that was a constant disruption.

Rep. John said that "first the parents should be contacted."

Rep. McClain stated, "that is why we have a system of common schools. The student should be returned to the public school."

Second is private schools do not have to follow any state mandates. The amount of money that Centerburg Local spends on just meeting state mandates is very costly. I used to ask legislators to defend allowing charter schools to operate without the mandates while public schools must implement them.

Their response was that we need a system that can operate outside the mandates so they can be creative and innovative.

My response was they were admitting the mandates are the problem and maybe they should just repeal them. Usually, the conversation ended quickly.

The third issue at first doesn't sound like a problem but digging deeper creates some troubling issues. Private schools are permitted to choose whatever curriculum they like regardless of its content. Many private schools are religion-based where public schools are not permitted to include any religious curriculum in the school day.

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Again, at first some approve of this or think "what's the problem?"

What if a school wants to be a school whose religion states communism is God-ordained?

What if their religion believes that the Nazi's were right in World War II and that Jews should be terminated?

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If their religion believes in Sharia Law and so men are superior to women and women need to learn to be subservient?

Some believe that the Bible states one race is superior to another and that racism is God-created.

I think you get the point.

In America you are permitted to have these beliefs, but nowhere in the constitution does it say that tax dollars have to be used to perpetuate this type of thinking.

The Supreme Court has ruled many times that the state is not allowed to discriminate if it chooses to support faith-based ideals. So, if the state allows tax dollars to pay for religious teaching, then they must pay for all faith-based beliefs regardless if we find them repulsive.

Lebanon City Elementary School in Ohio had to allow an after-school Satan Club to meet in the school because they allow other organizations to also use the school.

Currently, the legislature is working on a bill that would forbid Critical Race Theory to be taught in public schools. This bill is in direct conflict with the voucher bill.

There are other issues that will be a problem but not a reason to forbid vouchers.

Many private schools don't have athletics or other extracurricular activities and the students from private schools participate on public school teams. If the public schools have all the high-cost students, I doubt the school will have the funds to support extracurricular activities.

Public schools will be required to accept the base voucher amount and charge no more. There will be others that will have a higher tuition fee and the voucher will help, but the family will need to come up additional funds.

This will create a system where schools with high costs to offer absolute basics, other schools that have average offerings will require families to add a few thousand dollars to the voucher amount, and schools that have great opportunity but will need a large amount from families to supplement the voucher.

My guess is school funding will stagnate and the legislature will state if you want more for your child then you need to come up with the difference. Is that really the system we want?

If these things can be figured out, then by all means a competitive system is a good idea. But if these issues aren't fixed now and the bill is enacted, I fear in a few years we'll have a system that separates our society financially and philosophically.

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Our society is more polarized now along political lines than I have ever seen. What will it be like when kids are taught using hateful curriculum? I suggest we be careful.

Mike Hebenthal

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