

HB290—Universal Voucher Bill Not About Improving Education

When school choice-friendly state officials or school choice advocates are asked why they support alternatives to authentic public education, many if not most will say something like—“to improve education”. But then some of these advocates recognizing that school choice, as research reveals, has not improved education will confess that school choice is only about the right to choose a private education at public expense. The school choicers have tipped their hand by the introduction and support of the Backpack bill (HB290)—a voucher for every student. House Bill 290 of the 134th Ohio General Assembly demonstrates that voucher advocacy was never about rescuing poor kids from low-performing districts. It was always about the notion that parents have the right to private education at public expense, contrary to the Ohio Constitution.

Marilou JohaneK’s commentary in a recent Ohio Capital Journal demonstrates that the ultimate voucher bill—HB290—is not about education outcomes. It is about ideology.

COMMENTARY

‘Backpack bill’ disingenuous play for tax dollars

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If there’s one thing Ohio taxpayers hate – other than paying taxes – it’s being ripped off by disingenuous ideologues in the statehouse.

You’re not going to like what a pair of legislators are itching to do with your tax money that pays for public schools. They want to divert a ton of it to mostly religious and private schools with no strings attached and no determined oversight.

We’ve been down this road before with the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT) disaster. The online charter school siphoned off billions of tax dollars for *years* while politicians looked the other way—and pocketed campaign checks. The latest scheme hatched to funnel public funding into private coffers (under the smokescreen of school choice) is the brainchild of a conservative Christian lobbying group and two Ohio House Republicans.

State Reps. Riordan McClain, R-Upper Sandusky, and Marilyn John, R-Richland County, joined forces with the Center for Christian Virtue to siphon off an open-ended amount of public money (estimates range from \$150 million to over a \$1 billion *annually*) from the state’s new “Fair School Funding Plan.” They couldn’t wait to get their hands on the cash in the long-awaited funding overhaul designed to lift chronically underfunded public schools out of despair.

Only months after the reformulated education payment plan was *finally* approved – following a years-long bipartisan effort to create more equitable, stable and predictable revenue streams for Ohio’s 1.6 million public school children – McClain and John pitched their plan for a cut of the action. They held a press conference, staged with private school kids and a highly partisan religious lobbyist, and framed their proposed raid on the public dole as a benign enterprise “about students and increasing opportunities for all.”

A perfectly reasonable-sounding sentiment that masked a perfectly radical goal to defund public education.

The lawmakers, allied with CCV president Aaron Baer, pushed for universal vouchers in Ohio. Essentially, they think taxpayers should be on the hook for two separate education systems, public and private, with a few caveats for the latter:

1. Private schools remain exempt from the same level of financial and academic scrutiny that applies to public schools.
2. Private schools, unlike public ones, do not have to enroll all students that apply, regardless of backgrounds or possible physical or mental disabilities.
3. Private schools can ignore laws against employment discrimination that public schools must honor.

They introduced House Bill 290, under debate in committee, that would basically let anyone in Ohio get a government check – regardless of income or the quality of community school – to ostensibly offset tuition costs at whatever school, from parochial to prep academy, was selected over the local district.

Conceivably, affluent families, whose students are already enrolled in private schools, could tap into public education funds they don’t need. Taxpayers could shoulder the burden of bailing out scores of religious schools losing revenue and enrollment.

“This is a major shift in education policy,” said Baer.

I’ll say. A major departure from the Establishment Clause and separation of church and state. A major repudiation of the Ohio Constitution’s promise to fund *not* individual students but a “system of common schools throughout the state.” And arguably a major misuse of a finite pool of public tax dollars to fund private schools held to a different standard.

McClain and John dodge questions about the prohibitive expense of subsidizing private tuitions, but regale the Christian right with “pro-child, pro-parent, pro-family” talking points that slyly suggest a lack of those foundations in Ohio’s 610 traditional school districts. The sponsors and

religious advocates of the audacious gambit to privatize public education nicknamed House Bill 290 “the backpack bill,” as in a backpack of taxpayer money to travel to any nonpublic school of choice.

The moniker is purposely inoffensive and pointedly insidious. It portrays taxpayer subsidized school choice as a necessity to enrich learning because, as McClain astutely noted, each child is different, with different gifts, interests, needs. John added that each student learns a different way. “One size doesn’t work,” she declared. All bombshell revelations (not!) to educators professionally trained and practically experienced in teaching and tailoring daily lesson plans to a broad spectrum of learners who have different gifts, interests, needs.

The universal voucher zealots insist that publicly funding private schools and religious education will improve public schools through competition. Please. The same arguments were made with the proliferation of Ohio’s abysmal charter schools that routinely registered grade levels *behind* traditional public schools. A Cincinnati Enquirer analysis of private and mainly religious schools—that received hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars since 2018—documented similar patterns in lower state testing results for parochial schools. In 88% of the cities studied, public school districts outperformed private schools in academic achievement.

What’s *really* driving this budget-busting, tax money giveaway is ideology not educational outcome. The pair of GOP legislators gave themselves away. “It seems every day another story comes out of a rural, suburban or urban school pushing harmful political agendas in the classroom.” Lobbyist Baer, whose organization promotes public policy “that reflects the truth of the Gospel,” is clearly on a mission against the “hypersexualized and political curriculum forced” on students across Ohio.

Whatever fallacies float your boat. But keep your mitts of our tax dollars and stop ripping off the public school system that educates 90% of our kids.

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