

Steve Dyer: A Takedown of Fordham Over the Next Several Days. First Installment

Fordham Institute rides high in Ohio's political environment. This group has the ear of the ruling class in the legislature. It's time to expose the nature and agenda of this organization. Steve Dyer is the person to do so!

Fordham Wants School Choice Explosion

Want "income-based" vouchers available for 90% of Ohio families

Stephen Dyer

Look, I've had a love-hate relationship with the Fordham Institute for years now. I consider them one of the better charter school sponsors in the state, generally committed to running good schools, not just profitable ones. Chad Aldis and I have been frequent guests on TV and radio shows going back and forth on funding and policy. We worked together to get House Bill 2 passed in 2015 — a charter school reform package that brought Ohio into the mainstream on charter school oversight (or at least in a major tributary of that stream).

But their latest call to massively spend on a separate school funding system that has been such a wretched overall failure for our students and led to the greatest taxpayer ripoff in Ohio history while demanding that taxpayers subsidize private school tuitions for nearly 90% of Ohio households and calling that a "middle class" initiative is too much.

[Charter State Report Card Grades chart]

I don't want to bore anyone with the blow-by-blow takedown of this reckless policy positioning in one huge post, so I'll have to do this over several.

I'll begin with their mind-numbing call for families making \$111,000 a year to get \$7,500 in taxpayer money to attend a private school, without any call for public oversight of how those funds get spent.

Vouchers: Worse performing, racially segregating, no fiscal oversight. But, hey. Let's put more tuition subsidies there.

My feelings on Ohio's voucher program are pretty clear. We know that in nearly 9 in 10 cases, Ohio's public schools outperform the private schools that get these vouchers. We know that voucher recipients are 54% more likely to be White than the typical student in the district they leave — sometimes far more likely to be White. For example, Princeton City Schools in Hamilton County is 77% minority, yet 92.8% of the 265 students taking vouchers from there are White. We also know that as many as 2 in 3 voucher students never attended the public school that is being punished financially for "failing" them.

[Chart]

[EdChoice District Breakdown by Race chart]

Yet still Fordham insists that this state explode voucher investment.

Why?

I simply don't know. I realize some feel it's because Fordham wants to destroy public education. And, to be honest, it's hard not to think that when they so forcefully call for massive influxes of cash to be sent to unaccountable private entities that directly compete with public schools.

To their credit, they do call for more analysis of private school performance. Though, tellingly, Fordham doesn't demand students take more high-stakes standardized tests in private schools the way they've insisted be done in public schools for decades. All they claim needs done is some data manipulation to show "growth" of private school students.

Um. Yeah. No chance of gaming that analysis.

One point that the author — Aaron Churchill — makes is I think really telling about private schools' currently poor performance on proficiency tests.

"Although such data provide useful point-in-time snapshots of where students stand, they can also be misleading to the public, as proficiency data tend to correlate with demographics."

Never mind that Churchill and Fordham's founder Checker Finn have castigated urban districts' claims of standardized tests' demographic bias for years. And proficiency tests have real consequences for school districts. Proficiency scores are the basis for Ohio's Performance Index, a district's score on which will determine whether charter schools can open there.

But what really floors me is there is nothing — not a word — about increasing fiscal oversight of vouchers. Given the fact that the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow scandal, which at \$117 million represents the single largest taxpayer ripoff in Ohio history, took 17 years to uncover despite annual state audits and Department of Education oversight, doesn't it seem like a slam dunk to ask for tighter oversight of how private schools spend the hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars they receive?

Does anyone honestly believe there are no ECOTs out there on the voucher side?

[Voucher Payments chart]

Yet here is Fordham — ostensibly a watchdog for taxpayer rip-offs — condoning the annually hiding hundreds of millions of dollars (\$3.6 billion and counting since 1996) behind a secretive wall of corporate governance.

If Fordham were really serious about running a good, accountable voucher program, here is what they'd call for:

1. Require schools taking vouchers to have substantially similar racial makeups in their voucher students as the districts the students are leaving. No more taking 100% white students from majority minority districts the way schools like Temple Christian in Lima does.

2. Require all private schools taking vouchers to charge no additional tuition on top of the taxpayer subsidy. This used to be the case under Ohio law until John Kasich eliminated it. That change has meant financial catastrophe for many families and needlessly delayed students' academic progress as private schools withhold transcripts for non-payment of tuition.
3. Any private school taking a voucher has to prove they actually have the student they're being paid to educate and give the Department of Education the same authority to check this that they do in every charter school and school district.
4. Any private school taking a voucher has to demonstrate how that voucher is being spent to educate that single student — no co-mingling of taxpayer subsidies with private tuition payments. If we're actually going to have "money follow the student", then that money should only pay for that student. I challenge Fordham or anyone to push for this — the actual literal meaning of the whole "money following the student" canard.
5. All voucher recipients have to attend the local public school for 180 days prior to applying for the voucher. If you're going to take money away from public schools so kids they've "failed" can "escape" to private schools, shouldn't you actually give the district a chance to succeed first?
6. All voucher students have to take the same tests that they would have had to take in public school. The fact that voucher students don't have to take the same tests as public students makes comparisons difficult. Except to say that even though public school students take tougher and more frequent tests, public students still outperform voucher students in private schools nearly 9 out of 10 times.

Fordham won't push for any of these reforms. They should, if they're serious about running a good governance program. But I don't think they are.

Which is why I say the state needs to end the whole practice of publicly subsidizing private school tuitions, especially while it is only funding the Fair School Funding Plan, which is designed to educate the 90% of students in local public schools, at 1.3 of the needed level.

The evidence is clear, and has been for years: Ohio's vouchers don't provide better options for students, subsidize private choices parents have already made, lead to greater racial segregation of schools and communities, and toss billions of public tax dollars into a budgetary black hole that has zero accountability or oversight.

Tomorrow, I'll look at the budgetary consequences of Fordham's call for increased investment in school choice programs and what it means for the 90% of students who don't participate in these options — a group of students Fordham has a frequent and convenient habit of ignoring.

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To see the charts referenced in the blog go to: <https://10thperiod.substack.com/p/fordham-wants-school-choice-explosion?sd=pf>