

### **Crafty Pro-Voucher Group Found a New Way to Force Taxpayers to Fund Religious Schools**

The pro-voucher group that owns a building across from the Statehouse has found a new way to fleece taxpayers. They call the scheme “micro-school.” The “school” operates in a church building. The operators intend for it to be fully funded via vouchers.

The church facility is located in a low-income area. This is the same strategy used by all voucher and charter school initiators to get a foot-in-the-door. In due time, the “micro-schools” will be located everywhere. To be clear, this is an operation funded by taxpayers.

School founders plan to replicate the “micro-school” in 5 to 10 locations next school year.

These “schools,” if chartered by the state, would become eligible for auxiliary services and administrative cost reimbursement, and transportation by the school district of residence at taxpayers’ expense.

This scheme highlights the need for public school advocates to support the lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the EdChoice voucher scheme.

### **Tax dollars used in a new way to set up religious schools in Ohio**

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There’s an educational experiment happening in one of Columbus’ poorest neighborhoods that could expand to a national model.

In August, 31 children from the Hilltop and Franklinton areas began attending a new religious school called Westside Christian inside converted Sunday school classrooms at Memorial Baptist Church.

Founders of this “micro-school” call it a new, low-cost way to open private schools in underserved communities using state education dollars (known in Ohio as EdChoice vouchers) instead of private donations. And if it’s successful, they hope to open hundreds more.

“Our goal is five to 10 more in Ohio next year...,” Center for Christian Virtue Executive Director Troy McIntosh said. “But we want to take this model and export it to other states.”

Public school advocates worry this is a misuse of the EdChoice Scholarship system at best or another step toward dismantling public education at worst.

“It’s not about rescuing kids from failing schools,” former Democratic lawmaker and school finance expert Stephen Dyer said. “It’s all about subsidizing private education and mostly religious education.”

### **Private school, public dollars**

Traditionally, opening a private school requires millions of dollars in donations that “float” the school until tuition can cover its expenses. That’s how McIntosh’s former employer, Worthington Christian Schools, opened a Powell location while he was there.

“It’s a legitimate way of starting a school,” McIntosh said. “But it’s not scalable.”

Westside Christian, however, went from idea to reality for about \$100,000 in donations in a single year.

The biggest upfront savings came from using the church’s existing Sunday school classrooms, gymnasium and commercial kitchen with minimal upgrades.

“Church buildings are empty six days a week, and we have students in failing schools who need another option,” Center for Christian Virtue President Aaron Baer said. “These kids don’t have the money to pay for private school. Ed-Choice is a lifeline for them.”

And it’s the financial lifeline for the Center for Christian Virtue’s funding model. The \$5,550 per pupil vouchers combined with reimbursable fees for EdChoice schools will cover almost all of the school’s operating expenses once the state approves its application.

“That’s how the financial model works,” Baer said.

That’s also why the Center for Christian Virtue chose the Hilltop area. Every student in the surrounding neighborhoods is likely eligible for an income or performance-based voucher.

### **New and improved?**

“I would think long and hard before putting my child in one of these schools,” Ohio Education Association President Scott DiMauro said. “They have no record.”

His organization, which represents more than 121,000 Ohio educators and support staff, has watched dozens of charter schools open with similar lowcost plans then fold within a couple of years.

“Our members see students come back significantly behind academically, and we have to work hard to catch them up,” DiMauro said.

He’s concerned these “microschools” could be the next big education scandal. A 2016 state audit eviscerated Ohio’s largest online charter school. Records revealed that the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow or ECOT collected public about \$80 million for 9,000 students without proof those children existed or attended class. ECOT closed in 2018. And the Ohio Supreme Court ordered the charter school company and its founder to return \$60 million in October 2021.

“There’s also less accountability (in private school),” DiMauro said.

Ohio doesn’t audit how private institutions spend their voucher dollars, and state reports don’t grade them based on student performance or standardized test results. In short, nothing ensures that EdChoice schools are any better than the ones designated as “underperforming.”

“I think there’s this mythology that private is better,” DiMauro said.

A 2020 investigation by the Cincinnati Enquirer found most public school children scored higher on state tests than their private school counterparts.

Students in Cincinnati, Toledo, Cleveland, Akron and Canton performed better “by margins ranging from slight to decisive,” according to the Enquirer analysis. Students in Columbus, however, did not.

McIntosh and Baer plan to open at least five but possibly up to 10 new micro- schools by the 2023-2024 academic year. Several will be in the Columbus area, but McIntosh said they are also looking at locations around Cincinnati and in northwest Ohio.

They’ve also fielded calls from interested churches in Oklahoma, Washington and Florida.

“There are kids who aren’t best served by their current system,” McIntosh said. “We want to be an option for them.”

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*The Columbus Dispatch*

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