

## **Jan Resseger Identifies the Most Prominent Groups That Are Working to Defund Ohio Public Common Schools**

In her September 13 blog, Jan Resseger discusses the most prominent groups working with the Ohio Legislature to destroy public education.

### **Far-Right Organizations Work With Ohio Legislators to Privatize Public Education**

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Ohio is overrun with far-right advocates pushing the privatization of public education through the expansion of both vouchers and charter schools and with people spreading alarm about public school teaching of divisive subjects. This should not be surprising in our [notoriously gerrymandered Republican state legislature](#). Here are some of the extremist organizations whose lobbyists counsel our legislators, help them draft legislation, and make political donations.

#### **The Buckeye Institute**

[Sourcewatch describes](#) this Ohio organization: “The Buckeye Institute... is a right-wing advocacy group based in Ohio. It is a member of the \$120 million-a-year State Policy Network (SPN), a web of state pressure groups that denote themselves as “think tanks” and drive a right-wing agenda in statehouses nationwide.” [Sourcewatch further describes](#) the State Policy Network: “[SPN groups](#) operate as the policy, communications, and litigation arm of the [American Legislative Exchange Council](#) (ALEC), giving the cookie-cutter ALEC agenda a sheen of academic legitimacy and state-based support.”

On Tuesday of last week, [The Buckeye Institute released a new report](#) outlining its strategy for helping students “regain lost learning” during the pandemic: “In its new policy report... The Buckeye Institute outlines how empowering parents, funding students first, and enhancing school choice can counteract the ill effects the pandemic had on learning loss for Ohio’s K-12 students.” While The Buckeye Institute claims to focus on individual students in its response to the past two years of COVID disruption, the new report doesn’t mention students at all. There is nothing about giving students extra attention in smaller classes or more enrichments and activities to make school exciting or more counselors and mental health support. Instead the report addresses the more abstract issues of school ownership and governance. In essence universal marketplace school choice via vouchers is the solution: “The report offers four commonsense policy solutions that will improve the K-12 academic experience:

- “Broad-Based Education Savings Accounts: Create a broad-based ESA initiative to reform Ohio’s education system and its long-standing government-run education monopoly...”
- “Universal Open Enrollment: Make it easier for all families to send students to their school of choice by requiring all Ohio public schools to participate in inter-district open enrollment.
- “Expanded Tax Credit Scholarships: Increase the maximum tax credit from its current \$750 limit to \$2,500 to make it easier for grant organizations to offer larger scholarships (vouchers) to more students in need.

- “Enhanced Spending Transparency: Require all public school districts to operate more transparently by sharing their spending data with parents in Ohio Checkbook.”

### **The Center for Christian Virtue**

The Center for Christian Virtue recently purchased an office building across the street from the Statehouse in Columbus to bring the organization right into the center of power in Ohio. One of the Center for Christian Virtue’s new initiatives is to help locate private religious schools in churches—schools that qualify for tax-funded EdChoice vouchers. For the *Statehouse News Bureau*, [Jo Ingles reports](#): “A new, private school has been commissioned in Columbus, but it’s not like many others... Inside the walls of the Memorial Baptist Church on the west side of Columbus, classrooms normally used for Sunday church services are being readied for kindergarten through second grade students who have been going to local public schools. That’s according to Aaron Baer, president of the Center for Christian Virtue, a conservative Christian organization. He said seven churches came together to create this new model school. This is a pilot project for the Center for Christian Virtue. And the group said it’s just the first of many that will use church facilities for a private Christian school.” “Children who enroll in the school this year can use state money through Ohio’s EdChoice Scholarship Program to pay for their tuition because they will fit the income or school attendance area guidelines... Other Christian-based schools are now receiving money from the EdChoice Scholarship program.”

Ingles adds that, “Baer’s organization is leading the charge for majority Republicans state lawmakers to adopt a bill, commonly called the “backpack” bill, that would expand the Ed Choice Scholarship even more to allow any student, regardless of income or where they live, to use public money for private schools.”

For the *Ohio Capital Journal*, [Zurie Pope reports](#) that the Center for Christian Virtue has gone farther than merely supporting HB 290, the Backpack Bill. Members of the Center for Christian Virtue’s staff helped write the language of the bill: “(D)ocuments obtained by the *Ohio Capital Journal* through a public records request reveal CCV’s involvement in HB 290 has been more extensive than previously known, and included the advice and promotion of outside groups like Heritage Action and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). This past February, a legislative aide for McClain (one of the bill’s sponsors) emailed a draft of the bill to CCV legislative liaison Nilani Jawahar and CCV lobbyist and Ohio Christian Education Network Assistant Director Corine Vidales.” The *Ohio Capital Journal*’s report also names so-called academic research the drafters of the Backpack Bill considered as they were drafting the bill: “Both studies were created by EdChoice, an Indiana-based think tank that advocates for school choice. Ohio’s private school voucher program is also called EdChoice.” Finally, explains Zurie Pope, of the *Ohio Capital Journal*, the executive director of the Ohio Christian Education Network, Troy McIntosh, “sent a draft of the bill to Stephanie Kruez, a regional director for Heritage Action, the policy arm of the right-wing think tank, The Heritage Foundation.”

### **The Thomas Fordham Institute**

The *Ohio Capital Journal*’s [Susan Tebben reports](#) that the Thomas Fordham Institute has joined a lawsuit pushing to overturn reasonable and sensible new rules recently imposed by the U.S. Department of

Education to improve oversight of the federal Charter Schools Program. The Fordham Institute functions not only as an Ohio think tank, but also as an approved sponsor of its own Ohio charter schools. Tebben explains: “An Ohio group that supports charter schools has joined in a lawsuit fighting against what they say is ‘hostility’ in rule-making by the U.S. Department of Education. The D.C. and Ohio-based Thomas Fordham Institute, a conservative education policy think tank, spoke as a ‘charter school sponsor’ for the state of Ohio, arguing that rules regulating enrollment and use of charter schools... will ‘disadvantage some or all of the charter schools sponsored by Fordham’... The part of the rule that charter school advocates have a problem with states charter schools would need to prove public schools are over-enrolled, and encourage but don’t require ‘community collaboration’ with fellow school districts.” The lawsuit Fordham joined claims: “The most successful charter schools are those that provide educational alternatives to under-enrolled schools, not those that simply house excess numbers of students.” Ohio’s Fordham Institute is supporting the idea that charter schools should operate in competition, not collaboration, with the public school districts in which they are located. Neither does Fordham worry about the areas in Ohio where too many low quality charter schools with fancy advertising are sucking essential dollars from the public schools that serve the majority of the community’s students.

The Fordham Institute’s [Aaron Churchill recently published](#) a detailed set of priorities the Fordham Institute will be advocating this winter when the legislature begins to debate Ohio’s FY 2024-2025 biennial state budget. Churchill explains that Fordham will lobby to expand the charter school funding formula, expand special targeted assistance for charter schools, raise the facilities alliance to cover building costs, and support a credit enhancement to make building restoration and construction more affordable for charter schools. Fordham will also lobby to make EdChoice vouchers available for all students living in families with income up to 400 percent of the federal poverty level and allow brand new private schools to receive publicly funded vouchers from students even in a private school’s first year of operation. To its credit, Fordham will push to make the academic quality of private schools accepting vouchers more transparent by requiring, for the first time, private schools to release standardized test scores. Fordham will also lobby to make interdistrict public school choice universal across all the districts in the state, removing discretion for local school boards to decide whether to participate.

### **Hillsdale College Barney Charter School Initiative**

In the first of an important three-part expose for *SALON* last spring, [Kathryn Joyce outlined](#) the fast-growing initiative of Michigan’s conservative Christian Hillsdale College to disseminate its Classical Academy curriculum—which is Christian as well as classical—nationwide by encouraging charter schools to incorporate its model curriculum: “Hillsdale is not just a central player, but a ready-made solution for conservatives who seek to reclaim an educational system they believe was ceded decades ago to liberal interests. The college has become a leading force in promoting a conservative and overtly Christian reading of American history and the U.S. Constitution. It opposes progressive education reforms in general and contemporary scholarship on inequality in particular... Across the nation, conservative officials from state leaders to insurgent school board embers are clamoring to implement Hillsdale’s proudly anti-woke lesson plans, including the ‘patriotic education’ premises of its recently released 1776 Curriculum, or add to its growing network of affiliated classical charter schools.”

The *NY Times*' [Stephanie Saul explains](#) the Hillsdale College Barney Charter School Initiative's name: "Hillsdale's charter school operation... began in 2010 with a grant from the Chicago-based Barney Family Foundation, endowed by Stephen M. Barney, a financial industry executive. Saul continues: "The Hillsdale charter schools are neither owned nor managed by Hillsdale. Instead, the schools enter agreements to use the Hillsdale curriculum and the college provides training for faculty and staff, as well as other assistance—all free of charge."

The number of Hillsdale Classical Charter Schools is growing in Ohio. I currently count four either in operation already or getting set to open: the [Cincinnati Classical Academy](#); the [Northwest Ohio Classical Academy](#) in Toledo; the [Heart of Ohio Classical Academy](#) in Columbus; and the [Southeast Ohio Classical Academy](#) in Athens. Another Hillsdale Classical Academy is a private school, the [Columbus Classical Academy](#), which, I'm sure, accepts vouchers which have been permitted for religious schools since 2002 under the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Zelman v. Simmons Harris*.

Four of these schools, however, are charter schools—which Ohio considers public schools. As schools with an explicitly Christian curriculum, these charter schools, deemed public by Ohio law, raise obvious questions about church-state separation. After the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Carson v. Makin*, a Maine school voucher decision which affirmed the constitutionality of publicly funding schools that explicitly teach religion, perhaps these Ohio Hillsdale charter schools will ultimately be tested with further litigation.

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