

A.J. Calderone, Superintendent of Labrae Schools and member of the E&A Steering Committee explains the necessity of the EdChoice voucher litigation in a guest column in the Warren Tribune Chronicle and the Youngstown Vindicator.

Superintendent Calderone raises a series of questions that citizens of Ohio should seriously ponder regarding the ongoing flow of tax revenue to private schools. The money flows but there is no accountability to the public.

Future of school voucher system is questionable

GUEST COLUMNISTS

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Guest columnist

Over the last 20-plus years, Ohio's school voucher program has gradually expanded with each passing state budget. What started out in the 1990s as a pilot program designed to help impoverished families trapped in "failing schools" has gradually morphed over time into an expansive program that has ballooned to a taxpayer-funded expense exceeding \$361 million in the 2021-2022 school year. It increased 31 percent over the previous year.

The Ohio General Assembly's majority has been eating the elephant one bite at a time. Over the last three budget cycles, the General Assembly has significantly expanded eligibility criteria and has demonstrated a clear legislative intent via H.B. 290, and now Ohio Sen. Sandra O'Brien's Senate Bill 11, to make educational vouchers universal for all Ohio students, regardless of residency or family income levels. Proposed bills such as House Bill 290 and SB 11 are commonly referred to as Backpack Bills, and they are guaranteed to be part of the budget-making process that is underway at the Statehouse. Should universal vouchers become law, all private school students currently not eligible for a voucher would qualify to receive one. It is estimated to cost Ohio taxpayers an additional \$1 billion per year to fund those students currently in private schools and not receiving a voucher under current law. Moreover, school funding experts question if such a move is affordable, as it creates an extremely sizable rebate / refund program for families that already are paying their tuition expenses out of pocket.

Legislative leaders espouse the notion that "the money should follow the child," which under this premise, would mean Ohio taxpayers are responsible for funding three types of school systems, their local public schools, Ohio charter schools and private schools. Such a system creates many questions that Ohio citizens should ponder earnestly.

For example, should the money follow the child? Will private schools be subject to the same levels of accountability as local public schools? Are private school teachers properly certified at the same level as public schools? Will taxpayer funds flowing to private schools be subject to audits? Is the achievement of students taking the voucher better than their public school counterparts? Will private schools be

required to accept all students? Should Ohio taxpayers fund parent choice? If the State diverts hundreds of millions of dollars to private schools via vouchers, what might be the impact on local public schools? What might be the long-term impact on local property taxes? Why is Ohio increasing dollars for vouchers faster than the legislature is increasing dollars to fully fund the Ohio Fair School Funding Plan? Does Ohio allow such a transfer of taxpayer funds for other public goods such as parks, police and fire?

These questions are just a sampling of important considerations in the voucher debate.

Last year, an ever-growing list of Ohio public schools initiated a lawsuit against the State of Ohio questioning the constitutionality of the voucher program. Simply, the belief is that vouchers hurt Ohio. Further, these school districts believe the State voucher program is unconstitutional, and Ohio taxpayers should not subsidize parents who choose private education over the public good offered by their local community. LaBrae is a participating district in the Vouchers Hurt Ohio lawsuit. We see vouchers as an existential threat to public schools, which are a foundational institution of our society that play a critical role in fostering individual opportunity and helping to sustain democracy. Moreover, the LaBrae Board of Education believes the lawsuit is integral to protecting public education and Ohio taxpayers. The vast expansion of the voucher program has created scrutiny. In light of the legislature's refusal to curb the growth of vouchers, the only avenue for clarity on the program's legality is through the courts, thus the Vouchers Hurt Ohio suit against the State.

A.J. Calderone is superintendent of LaBrae Local Schools.

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