

David DeWitt: Ohio cheats taxpayers and public schools by funneling money to unaccountable private interests.

David DeWitt in his February 2 [article](#) provides insight on how the Governor's budget proposal heaps tax money on the privatized school industry at the expense of the public system.

COMMENTARY

Ohio cheats taxpayers and public schools by funneling money to unaccountable private interests

David DeWitt

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Many Ohioans pay taxes for schools but don't have school-age children. Their taxes are meant to fund quality public schools because having educated citizens is a public good. Sending their money to unaccountable for-profit, private, and religious schools is a terrible abuse.

Compelling taxpayers to support private interests at the expense of public ones is not only unethical, but unconstitutional when those private interests intertwine with religion. American taxpayers should never be forced to fund the efforts of religious institutions of any kind. Not one red cent.

The very first clause in the First Amendment of our Bill of Rights is couched firmly in that defining principle. The entire basis for making "no law respecting an establishment of religion" the first clause was "Father of the Constitution" James Madison's takedown of anti-Constitution Patrick Henry's proposal to send taxpayer money to support religious institutions.

Nevertheless, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine has put forward a budget proposal to expand school voucher subsidies that would send money to private, for-profit, and religious ventures. Prominent Ohio Republican Statehouse leaders appear to be on board.

From Cleveland.com's Laura Hancock:

Families are eligible for EdChoice scholarships by either living in the boundaries of a low-performing school or by household income. Currently, a family of four can qualify for state money if the household income is at or below \$69,375, or 250% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines. The limit would increase to 400% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines, which would be \$111,000 for a family of four, under DeWine's proposal. ...

EdChoice vouchers are distributed as checks given to private schools to help cover a student's tuition. The scholarship amount is currently \$5,500 for students in grades k-8 and \$7,500 for grades 9-12. Republicans who control the legislature expanded vouchers in 2012, 2020, and 2021.

So vouchers are already available to low-income households and in low-performing districts, which means the only reason to increase the voucher threshold to 400% is for a massive sweetheart giveaway to private interests.

DeWine's budget also would increase per-student building funding for all charter schools from \$500 to \$1,000 per student — a 100% bump — and provide an extra \$3,000 for each economically disadvantaged student, or a student who qualifies for free or reduced lunch — up from \$1,750 currently.

DeWine, Hancock notes, did not propose any extra per-student money for traditional public education.

Sadly, American public education was marked as a \$500 billion a year opportunity for private profiteering some time ago, and Ohio has been leading the way.

Over the past several decades, Ohio's seen one boondoggle after another.

Ohio taxpayers were ripped off by hundreds of millions of dollars, and nearly 12,000 Ohio schoolchildren and their families left in the lurch, when the ECOT scheme — dreamed up on a Waffle House napkin — crashed and burned in 2018.

Another for-profit charter school operator called White Hat Management drained \$67 million a year away from Ohio public schools before low test scores and soaring high school dropout rates led to a lawsuit from school boards and its eventual demise.

Dayton Daily News' Josh Sweigart has uncovered a smattering of cases the past decade, including nepotistic hiring, undocumented purchasing, and charter school board members overpaying themselves.

Meanwhile, Ohio Capital Journal's Zurie Pope revealed in reporting this past summer that the proposed "Backpack Bill" legislation last General Assembly to send public education money to private schools by the head was written with help from religious lobbying group the Center for Christian Virtue (CCV) and a think tank that promotes charter schools.

Promotion for the so-called "Backpack Bill" law featured CCV President Aaron Baer speaking at a press conference for it, and documents obtained by OCJ also revealed behind-the-scenes advice and promotion by outside groups like Heritage Action and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC).

ALEC even held a luncheon for lawmakers at the Statehouse promoted as a "Backpack Bill Briefing."

All of this has come amid a decades-long right-wing assault on public education itself, only becoming more venomous and destructive in recent years.

But by wide margins, parents express satisfaction with their kids' schools, and educational outcomes over the past 50 years in America have only steadily improved. From Education Next:

Contrary to what you may have heard, average student achievement has been increasing for half a century. Across 7 million tests taken by U.S. students born between 1954 and 2007, math scores have grown by 95 percent of a standard deviation, or nearly four years' worth of learning. Reading scores have grown by 20 percent of a standard deviation during that time, nearly one year's worth of learning.

The narrative of "failing public schools" has been manufactured by corrupt private school bloodsuckers looking to wet their beaks in the public school money pot.

Aside from its false pretenses, it undercuts funding and saps the ability of public schools to address real problems.

The biggest achievement gap in American education is directly tied to poverty. Exacerbating this situation is the fact that Ohio has had unconstitutional property tax-based school funding for 25 years. Wealthy districts do great, while low-income districts suffer mightily.

We have ample empirical evidence to prove that the way to address the poverty achievement gap is by robustly funding public schools to institute best practices: early childhood education; a well-rounded school experience including culture, sports, and the arts; extra-curricular activities that give students a sense of purpose; community-minded and community-building schools; cooperative learning.

But initiatives like these are the very things money-strapped districts are forced to cut first, alongside practical necessities like busing or the teachers themselves.

DeWine's proposed budget does include money for things such as early childhood education, and he has already awarded significant grants for it, which is commendable.

But he seems to want to balance this politically with a massive giveaway of public dollars to private school interests and the religious zealots aligned with CCV, which is unacceptable.

Many Ohio taxpayers — even those who don't have children or whose children are no longer school-age — are happy to help fund public schools.

We understand that quality public schools increase property values and make our communities attractive places to live, which helps them thrive.

We want our communities and our public schools to thrive.

What most Ohio taxpayers do not want is our public schools to continue to suffer as money and resources are siphoned away from them to prop up private, for-profit, and religious interests.

But when it comes to funding those interests, or fully and fairly funding Ohio's public schools, Republican Statehouse leaders have continually legislated for the private interests.

The vultures have poll-tested their messaging, so they love to talk about "school choice," "parents' rights," and "funding the students, not the system."

This is a smooth evasion that attempts to elide the fact that the question isn't about whether parents have a choice where to send their kids for schooling; everybody already does.

What these interests are asking for are endless direct state subsidies to their private enterprises and religious institutions.

And that's what DeWine and these lawmakers stand prepared to keep giving them, on our dime and at the expense of our public schools.

Every Ohio public school faces a yearly audit, but no such requirement exists for private schools receiving public vouchers. Why not? If public money is continually funneled into these schools, why are they not subjected to the same auditing standards as public schools to make sure that money is actually going toward appropriate education of students?

In an analysis of one proposed bill, the nonpartisan Legislative Services Commission found that two-thirds of kids getting vouchers in Ohio's expansion program have never been in public schools.

So that means that these kids aren't being "rescued" from public schools; they were never going to public schools in the first place. This is pure state subsidy of private school tuition. As the LSC puts it, these are "existing nonpublic school students that represent a new state responsibility."

Do the private schools lead to greater academic success?

A Cincinnati Enquirer analysis of nearly 2.5 million test scores from schools in more than 150 Ohio cities during the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years found that in 88% of the cities, the public district achieved better state testing results than the private schools.

Given all this, what assurances are Ohioans being given that our money will not be misused as it has been in the past? If this money is coming out of public school funding, what guarantees do we have that our public schools will be fully funded under the new Fair Funding plan?

Ohio Senate Republicans led by President Matt Huffman have made clear they want the full "Backpack Bill" pushed by the CCV. That would be the biggest win possible for the private interests. As this DeWine proposal is brought and negotiated between the House and Senate, it looks likely to become, essentially, "Backpack Bill Light."

I'm not holding my breath for full, fair public school funding. Legislators repeatedly steamroll DeWine and there's no reason to think they won't on this. There's only one pot. It's meant for high-quality public schools. But they always turn their backs on our public schools in favor of the private interests.

I come from a family of educators: My mom, a longtime teacher and junior high school principal; my sister, a primary school special education teacher; my grandmother, a high school teacher; my other grandmother, a school librarian; my grandfather, a school teacher and later the dean of a Kent State University branch.

I grew up surrounded by public educators, both at school and at home. I grew up generally believing that we as a society agreed about the importance and value of public education.

It came as a great shock to me when I entered adulthood that there are incredibly well-funded private interests working every day to undermine and rob our public schools.

Then I started seeing one for-profit school scam after another in Ohio, and realized that our state government was actively stoking the grift.

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When I ask the public educators I know for their thoughts, many tell me there's a definite role for traditional charters and private schools for the maybe 10% of students best off at them, but it's unconscionable to rob the other 90% of public school students and prioritize the 10%.

That seems reasonable.

Traditional charter and private schools have a place, but they must face just as much scrutiny and accountability and auditing as our public schools if they are to receive our money.

And propping up private schools should never, ever come at the expense of our already woefully unsupported public schools.

We need to dedicate ourselves to a positive vision of the wonderful beacons our public schools can be when we invest in them, when we support them, when we encourage them to be creative, and when we give them the resources and opportunity to thrive.

Public education is not failing. Ohio politicians are failing to prioritize and invest in public education.

<https://ohiocapitaljournal.com/2023/02/02/ohio-cheats-public-schools-and-taxpayers-by-funneling-to-private-schools-without-accountability/>