

Jan Resseger lists three priorities for public education advocates.

Support the Cupp/Patterson Fair School Funding Plan, oppose SB11 and oppose SB1. Support for a constitutional system of school funding, opposition to the EdChoice voucher scam, and the move to remove the state agency for education to the Governor's office are equally important and critical.

Advocates Who Want to Protect Ohio's Public Schools This Year Must Pursue Three Priorities

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On Tuesday in Columbus, Ohio, the powerful Ohio Senate Education Committee held its first meeting in the new session of the Ohio Legislature. In upcoming months, as the Legislature develops the next biennial state budget to be enacted by June 30, 2023, parents, educators, and citizens who care about the common good must pressure the Legislature to support the needs of Ohio's public schools. Securing the needs of Ohio's students in public schools will be a heavy lift in a legislature dominated by a conservative Republican supermajority.

The public schools, which serve 1.7 million of our children, don't seem to be what's on the minds of Ohio's legislative leaders right now. Tuesday's Senate Education Committee agenda featured two primary topics: Senate Bill 1, recently reintroduced to eviscerate the State Board of Education, and Senate Bill 11, a vast expansion of the state's EdChoice private school voucher program.

Those who support Ohio's public schools must focus on three priorities: (1) advocating for the full phase-in of the Fair School Funding Plan which was embedded in the biennial budget in June of 2021 but never established in a stand-alone law; (2) opposing the vast expansion of EdChoice private school tuition vouchers; and (3) opposing the Legislature's plan to politicize the Ohio State Board of Education by eviscerating its primary functions and moving them into a cabinet Department of Education and the Workforce under the political control of the governor.

Advocates Must Press for the Full Phase-in of the Cupp-Patterson Fair School Funding Plan in the FY 2024-2025 State Budget.

Two years ago, the Ohio Legislature began implementing a new "Fair School Funding Plan." The new formula had been carefully designed over three years to fund the state's public schools adequately and to distribute state funding equitably to ensure that students in poor as well as wealthy communities can thrive academically. Ohio's school funding had been deemed unconstitutional over 25 years ago in *DeRolph v. Ohio*, when the school funding formula was deemed overly reliant on local property taxes. The new Fair School Funding Plan, launched two years ago and based on funding the per-pupil cost of essential services needed by our state's typical student and adjusted to add categorical funds to support services for students with special needs, was designed to be phased in over six years—three three biennial budgets.

However, the Legislature failed to establish the Fair School Funding Plan in a stand-alone law. It would be unfair, Senate President Matt Huffman said, to tie the hands of future legislatures because nobody can predict the economic constraints on future revenues. In June of 2021, the Legislature did basically fund the first two years of the Fair Funding Plan. Now in 2023, the Legislature needs to add funding for the second step. Right now, Ohio has the two year beginning of a Fair School Funding Plan, but no promise that the legislature will continue funding the full phase-in.

The [Legislature also needs to correct one flaw](#). Lawmakers neglected to conduct a promised cost study to evaluate the needs of school districts serving many children in poverty, and they began the phase-in of

Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid at a much slower rate than their phase-in of the rest of the plan. It is the responsibility of the current Legislature to correct those serious problems.

Continued phase-in of the Fair School Funding plan is not a sure thing. The *Ohio Capital Journal's* [Susan Tebben reports](#) that Governor DeWine highlighted the Fair School Funding Plan among his budget priorities last week: "DeWine mentioned the plan in his speech, saying it should be funded, but Democrats are unsure what Republicans' plans are for the third year of the six-year phase-in designed in the plan. The plan has only been funded for two years so far, because (Senate President, Matt) Huffman refused to assign funding priorities to future general assemblies."

After the Governor presented his budget priorities, the *Columbus Dispatch's* [Haley BeMiller and Anna Staver added](#): "Huffman... expressed skepticism about DeWine's plan to fund schools. 'The same concerns I mentioned when we passed the budget two years ago are still in place,' he said."

Advocates Must Vociferously Oppose Senate Bill 11, Yet Another Expensive Expansion of EdChoice Vouchers.

While Senate President Matt Huffman seems anxious about the expense of fairly funding the public schools, Huffman doesn't seem a bit worried about the fiscal viability of a huge expansion of the EdChoice voucher program, now introduced as Senate Bill 11. The *Plain Dealer's* [Laura Hancock explains](#) that right now under the current EdChoice program, "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..." Under the proposed SB 11, "The limit would increase to 400% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines, which would be \$111,000 for a family of four...."

Most people worry that a huge expansion of the number of students taking EdChoice vouchers out of the school foundation budget will radically reduce funding for the state's public schools. Instead Senate President Huffman argues that the expansion of vouchers will save money for the public schools. Hancock quotes Huffman enthusing that: "(I)ncreasing vouchers up to 400% of the federal poverty line covers most of the state's residents... 'Although it's not a universal voucher, it practically speaking, is in many regards.'" Using specious math that fails to reflect the complex school funding formula, which distributes state funding to compensate for disparities in taxable property and aggregate family income from school district to school district, Huffman went so far as to claim: "As vouchers are expanded there's more money available for public schools..." Certainly Huffman is also ignoring that during the history of the EdChoice program, the majority of EdChoice vouchers have always been taken by families whose children already attend private schools. Assuming that trend would continue and more students already in private schools opt to take a voucher as a new entitlement, experts warn that Huffman's defense of vouchers as a way to save money for public schools is an absurd argument.

Advocates Must Oppose Senate Bill 1 to Eviscerate the State Board of Education and Move Most of Its Responsibilities to a Department of Education and the Workforce under the Control of Governor.

Efforts to politicize the Ohio State Board of Education culminated in December when the Legislature came close to passing Senate Bill 178. (See [here](#).) The effort collapsed in the final hours of the legislative session, but the bill was reintroduced immediately in January as Senate Bill 1. The *Ohio Capital Journal's* [Susan Tebben describes](#) the discussion of SB 1 at this week's first meeting of the new session's, Senate Education Committee: "Workforce development components of a bill to overhaul education in Ohio by taking power from the state school board and putting it under the governor's office

were applauded by supporters in an Ohio Senate committee Tuesday. Supporters ranged from businesses to career centers to the Ohio Chamber of Commerce, all of whom spoke out at the Senate Education Committee about the progress they believe the bill would make in developing workforce talent in the state, rather than bringing in employees from other states and countries.”

Tebben quotes Senator Bill Reineke describing bill he has introduced: “The bill’s focus is still the same: to improve academic and workforce skills to drive better accountability and outcomes for our kids’ education and career readiness.” Tebben also quotes Reineke explaining that the bill also will, “guarantee homeschooling families the ability to home-educate their child by exempting a child from compulsory school attendance when that child is receiving instruction in core subject areas from their parents.” She points to the irony that Reineke’s defense of homeschooling in Ohio “comes amid a new investigation by the Department of Education into what’s been reported as a pro-Nazi homeschooling network run by a couple from Upper Sandusky.”

As I listened to a December hearings on Senate Bill 1’s predecessor, SB 178 intended to reduce the power of Ohio’s state board of education, I heard the members of the committee frame their arguments about test-based accountability and expanding the workforce—abstract concepts that have little to do with [education practice](#)—which is the purview of the State Board. I listened to politicians discuss standardized test scores—numbers, percentages, and supposed trends measured by the numbers. The conversation did not once connect to what happens in a public elementary school classroom or in a comprehensive public high school. I listened to an ideological debate with little connection to the role of the State Board of Education, which is to shape education practice.

This year as Ohio’s law makers attempt once again to politicize the State Board of Education, advocates should demand that legislators attend to their own responsibility for education policy. The first step would be fully phasing in the Cupp-Patterson Fair School Funding Plan as the Legislature drafts the FY 2024-2025 state budget, a phase-in that must include promised dollars for Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid. A second step would be avoiding the catastrophic cost of a massive expansion of private school tuition vouchers. Finally, the Legislature should allow the State Board of Education, with several enthusiastic and well qualified new members elected in November, to get on with its work.

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