

Mohawk Local Schools hosts a co-sponsor of the Backpack Bill (universal vouchers introduced in the 134th General Assembly)

On January 27 the Superintendent and Treasurer of Mohawk Local School District gave a tour of some Mohawk school district programs and discussed with a co-sponsor of the Backpack Bill the impact vouchers will have on the school district. The attached article in the February 9 Daily Chief Union explains.

Mohawk admin hopes to educate public, politicians on vouchers

Posted on February 9, 2023

The Mohawk Local Schools administration recently welcomed Rep. Riordan McClain for a campus visit. The administration is reaching out to local politicians and the public hoping to share information about how schools are funded and the differences between state funding and regulations for public versus private and charter schools.

By BRIAN HEMMINGER

City editor

SYCAMORE — The Mohawk Local Schools administration is hoping to educate both the community and local lawmakers about the impact the voucher system and Ed choice bills will have on public education.

As part of the process, Mohawk administrators welcomed Rep. Riordan McClain on Jan. 27 to discuss local concerns with school funding and voucher expansion.

“We also used this opportunity to showcase our multi-handicapped classroom, math intervention program funded through Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief grants, technology initiatives, third grade classrooms where the teachers explained programs used to identify students for the state third-grade reading guarantee and district preschool programs,” Mohawk Treasurer Rhonda Feasel said. “After the tour, we presented data to support public school funding compared to the state voucher program, a comparison of regulations between public and private/charter schools, and Mohawk’s academic achievements.”

A detailed state funding payment report was provided to McClain with conversations about Mohawk’s base cost per pupil, which is currently \$7,920.

Out of that \$7,920, the state of Ohio funds the district at \$1,897 per pupil with the remaining \$6,023 per student coming from local support through property and income taxes.

“A common misconception is the district is receiving \$7,920 per pupil from the state,” Feasel said.

“However, current and prior funding formulas all require local taxpayers to share the burden of educating students by considering its capacity to generate local dollars. Currently, the local share is based upon 60% property values and 40% resident income.”

When juxtaposing funding and regulations to private entities receiving vouchers, there is little comparison to public schools, Mohawk Superintendent Jeff Holbrook said.

“It’s not even like comparing apples to oranges, it’s like comparing apples to road apples,” he said.

Ohio's expanded voucher program provides \$5,500 per student in grades kindergarten through eighth grade and \$7,500 for grades 9-12. By comparison, Mohawk receives just \$1,897 per pupil from the state. Private or charter schools receive four times the state funding per pupil.

Holbrook said out of the state's education budget, private and charter schools receive 25% of the funding despite only 10% of Ohio children attending private schools.

"It's not about fairness, because I understand life isn't fair, but it's more about equity," Feasel said. "We don't have equal opportunity or access to funding and we have high regulation versus almost no regulations."

Feasel shared a comparison of the differences in regulations between public schools compared to private, charter or home schools.

— Public schools require a third grade reading guarantee, must report high quality student data and must perform resident educator summative assessments, whereas private and charter schools do not.

— Public schools have mandatory state testing and all juniors take the ACT, while private schools have optional state and ACT testing. Public schools have state graduation requirements, whereas private and charter schools have local control over graduation requirements. Public schools have state curriculum standards, whereas private schools have optional standards with local control.

— Public schools are accountable to an elected board of education, whereas private and charter schools have a privately-appointed board of directors.

— Public schools have an Ohio Teacher Evaluation System, an Ohio Principal Evaluation System, a truancy and discipline plan under House Bill 410 and attendance audits, whereas private and charter schools are not required to have any of those.

Information on Ohio's regulations for public versus private schools and student funding was supplied by Vouchers Hurt Ohio, a coalition of public school districts against the use of state funds for private education, Feasel said.

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While Holbrook and Feasel said they didn't expect to completely change McClain's mind about the value public education, they hoped he at least gained a better understanding of the hoops public schools have to jump through compared to private, charter and homeschools.

"One of the biggest differences of all is public schools are required to teach everyone. We don't turn anyone away," Holbrook said. "If you're autistic, you have a handicap or you are a different race, we're going to educate you to the best of our ability. Private schools, unless specifically designed for the purpose of serving people with disabilities, can pick and choose which students they serve based upon local preference."

On the topic of homeschool and current state requirements, Holbrook said the district receives a piece of paper from a family seeking to homeschool its children and the family sends a syllabus for the upcoming school year. Mohawk then sends the information to the Educational Service Center to be vetted.

"We pay a fee to have a consultant review the curriculum," Holbrook said. "It's a step of accountability."

Senate Bill 11, the Ohio Senate version of McClain's "backpack bill," is a universal voucher program and is currently being considered by the legislature.

If passed, the bill will permit every student, regardless of family income to receive a voucher, and increases the state income tax credit from \$250 to \$2,000 for homeschooled students.

"The major concern with pouring more money in for vouchers is not only accountability, but less resources for public education," Feasel said. "The bottom line is more money for vouchers equals less money for public education and potentially an additional burden for local taxpayers."

If Feasel and Holbrook could have their way, they'd prefer slightly less regulations on public schools and more regulation on private and charter schools, especially if private and charter schools are going to receive more state money.

"There's only so much of the 'pie' that's available to be shared with public schools without raising taxes and you know a Republican super majority legislature isn't going to do that," Feasel said. "So if an Ed choice bill passes, it will continue to reduce the amount of funding available for public education."

Despite the hurdles of state regulation, Holbrook said Mohawk currently was tied for the best-performing school district in the Northern 10 Athletic Conference, with goals of being No. 1 the next time the results are calculated. Mohawk also had four standalone multi-handicapped units to better serve its diverse local student population.

"While school funding can be very complicated and often seen as unequitable, we feel very strongly that public funds should be used to support public education and not private education," Feasel said. "The Ohio Constitution requires the state to secure a thorough and efficient system of one common school throughout the state. Expanding vouchers will further unconstitutionally divide funding and accountability between public and private education."