

CC3502 4.24.23 Monday

Jan Resseger, in her April 18 blog identifies four current resources that will be helpful in resisting vouchers

The resources cited by Jan Resseger are compelling. Those willing to engage state officials in a discussion of the voucher issue need to be well-informed. The lop-sided composition of the 135th General Assembly, due to unconstitutional legislative district boundaries, guarantees that vouchers will be expanded either in the budget or a stand-alone bill by July 1, 2023. However, it is important to inform state officials of the damage universal vouchers will cause the public common school system.

A Tsunami of Private School Tuition Vouchers at Public Schools' Expense: Is There Anything We Can Do?

Posted on [April 18, 2023](#) by [janresseger](#)

In my state, Ohio, it seems almost inevitable that the legislature will expand publicly funded vouchers for school privatization as part of the two year state budget to be passed by June 30th.

The Ohio House of Representatives has been holding hearings on [House Bill 11—a universal “Backpack” Education Savings Account school voucher plan \(including for private schools, homeschooling and family micro-schools\)](#), which [the Legislative Service Commission](#) estimates would cost \$1.3 billion in its first year of operation.

The Ohio Senate, on the other hand, in a proposed [Parent Educational Freedom Act \(Senate Bill 11\)](#), would offer all students in grades K-12 a voucher—worth \$5,500 for elementary school and middle schoolers and \$7,500 for high school students—an investment which the [Legislative Service Commission \(LSC\) costs out](#) at an additional \$528 million in each year of the FY 2024-2025 state budget. Senate Bill 11 would also increase the homeschooling income tax credit from \$250 to \$2,000 (which the LSC estimates would cost an additional \$38 million in FY 2024 and \$44 million in FY 2025).

And in the **Governor’s proposed FY 2024-2025 state budget**, there is yet a third proposed school voucher expansion. While right now families living at 250 percent of the federal poverty line can qualify for EdChoice vouchers, [eligibility would be expanded in this year’s biennial budget](#) to include students whose family income is up to 400 percent of the federal poverty line, or \$120,000 per year. The [Legislative Service Commission says](#) this might cost the state \$172 million every year.

With Ohio’s gerrymandered, supermajority Republican legislature, citizens can be pretty sure one of these plans will move forward.

CC3502 4.24.23 Monday

Right now, proposed laws to privatize public schools with various types of publicly funded school vouchers are being considered in many of the state legislatures. Last month the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported](#): “Every child deserves a quality K-12 education that equips them for long-term opportunities and success. But this year, at least half of the states are considering school vouchers bills that undermine the promise of public schooling. School vouchers raise the risk of harm to students, do little to expand opportunity, and cut funding to public schools.”

A primary reason there is so much state legislative activity to enact or expand school vouchers is the big money behind the far-right school voucher lobby. [Diane Ravitch recently shared](#) information gathered by [Inside Philanthropy](#): “Dark money and disclosure rules make it difficult to pinpoint the funders that support vouchers or how much they are spending on these efforts... One reason it’s so hard to track is that a lot of that money is going through donor-advised funds which don’t have to identify which individual Donor-Advised Fund holders are making specific grants. The conservative... DonorTrust, for example, and its affiliated Donors Capital Fund have been moving money to groups that support vouchers.” According to *Inside Philanthropy*, voucher-supporting organizations getting large amounts of dark money from DonorsTrust include the Heritage Foundation, the American Federation for Children, the Independent Women’s Forum, and The Cardinal Institute.

It’s not all dark money, however. Some of the money being invested in voucher lobbying can be traced. *Inside Philanthropy* identifies the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation as, historically, a huge investor in pro-voucher advocacy. Today the organizations it funds in Wisconsin include the Bradley Impact Fund, the Badger Institute, and the Wisconsin Center for Law and Liberty. Outside Wisconsin, the Bradley Foundation is supporting the Buckeye Institute (Ohio) and the Goldwater Institute (Arizona). The Bradley Foundation together with a number of organizations funded by Charles Koch and DonorsTrust dark money have consistently funded a network of far right state think tanks through the State Policy Network, which works hand in hand with the American Legislative Exchange Council—also funded by Bradley, Koch, and DonorsTrust. Betsy DeVos helped found and is a big financial supporter of the American Federation for Children, which, *Inside Philanthropy* explains, has recently provided substantial funding behind lobbying for vouchers in Idaho, Texas, Nebraska, and Michigan. Finally “The libertarian Cato Institute, which Charles Koch helped create... supports a form of school voucher called “Scholarship Tax Credits.” And even the Gates Foundation recently granted \$1 million to the Reason Foundation, “a libertarian organization that supports vouchers and opposes public schools.”

If you are a supporter of public education, and in your state you face proposed legislation for school vouchers, you are unlikely to convince conservative Republicans to vote against vouchers. The issue has become purely ideological—a matter of core belief. The late political

theorist Benjamin Barber almost perfectly characterizes the divide between supporters of public institutions and the radical marketplace individualists: “Privatization is a kind of reverse social contract: it dissolves the bonds that tie us together into free communities and democratic republics. It puts us back in the state of nature where we possess a natural right to get whatever we can on our own, but at the same time lose any real ability to secure that to which we have a right. Private choices rest on individual power... personal skills... and personal luck. Public choices rest on civic rights and common responsibilities, and presume equal rights for all. Public liberty is what the power of common endeavor establishes, and hence presupposes that we have constituted ourselves as public citizens by opting into the social contract. With privatization, we are seduced back into the state of nature by the lure of private liberty and particular interest; but what we experience in the end is an environment in which the strong dominate the weak... the very dilemma which the original social contract was intended to address.” (*Consumed*, pp. 143-144)

Even though it will likely be impossible for any of us to convince state legislators who are strong ideological supporters of school privatization to change their minds, that doesn’t mean we all just give up. Remember that your letter to the editor or your legislative testimony will help form, support, and solidify overall public pressure on your legislators. You are also likely to wake up other citizens who haven’t been paying attention and to activate a wide reservoir of public opinion that already exists against the privatization of public schools. [Diane Ravitch explains](#): “Vouchers are not popular. There have been nearly two dozen state referenda about vouchers. Vouchers have always lost, usually by large margins.”

If you are planning to write a letter to the editor or to submit legislative testimony advocating the protection of your public schools from the theft of already scarce dollars in your state’s public school budget and the protection of the civil rights of your state’s students, here are four excellent and up-to-date resources:

First: [The Fiscal Consequences of Private School Vouchers](#), a new report from [Public Funds Public Schools](#)—a project of the Education Law Center and the Southern Poverty Law Center—addresses what it costs states to fund vouchers for private schooling and specifically what it costs the public schools themselves as states siphon out money for the vouchers. The report’s authors, are Samuel E. Abrams, the director of the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education at Columbia University’s Teachers College and his colleague Steven J. Koutsavlis. They explain: “The claim that it costs less to educate students with private school vouchers than in public schools ignores numerous realities. Voucher programs shift key expenses to parents; often subsidize private tuition for families who would never have enrolled in public schools; do not dilute fixed costs for public education systems, and concentrate higher-need, more-costly-to-educate students in already underfunded public schools.” “As states transfer millions of

dollars to private hands, there are fewer available state resources for projects that serve the public good, from mass transit to public parks, libraries, and schools.” And yet, “Voucher programs, even with significant expansion during the last one to two decades, still serve only a small percentage of the nation’s children.”

Second: In [State Policymakers Should Reject K-12 School Voucher Plans: Proposals Would Undermine Public Schools](#), the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities’ Iris Hinh examines many of the voucher programs currently being considered by the state legislatures. Hinh also provides background on how various voucher plans work and how they threaten public schools: “School vouchers reduce overall state revenues to fund services like education.... In some... cases they can be designed to divert money that’s already been designated for public schools through their state funding formula... And since the largest share of state spending is on public education, reducing overall state revenues almost inevitably reduces the available funding for public schools, especially as school voucher programs grow.” “While public schools must adhere to federal civil rights protections, students using vouchers to attend private schools can be explicitly or implicitly denied opportunities based on their race and ethnicity, gender presentation, and disability... Siphoning public dollars to fund private schools does not guarantee that all students will be admitted and adequately supported at private schools.”

Third: In [School Vouchers: There Is No Upside](#), Michigan State University Professor Josh Cowen, who has been conducting voucher research for more than two decades, enumerates what current research demonstrates about serious damage wrought by the widespread expansion of vouchers across the states: “First, vouchers mostly fund children already in private school... Second... Although a few tiny studies from the late 1990s and early 2000s showed small gains in test scores for voucher users, since 2013, the record is dismal... Third... the typical private school in line for a voucher handout isn’t one of the elite private schools.... The typical voucher school is what I refer to as a sub-prime provider.... The fourth pattern is related: kids flee those sub-prime schools... Fifth comes the issue of transparency and oversight... If we’re going to use taxpayer funds on these private ventures, we need to know what the academic results are... Finally... Imagine you simply knew that written into the legislation for voucher programs is the explicit right of private schools to turn down any child they wanted to reject so long as something about that child varied from the school’s so-called ‘creed.’” Here is a [summary of Cowen’s research comparing public school achievement levels with the collapse in academic achievement](#) after students carrying vouchers have been enrolled in private schools.

Fourth: In [State of the States: Governors and PK-12 Education Policy](#), a short new resource from the Brookings Institution’s Brown Center Chalkboard. Rachel Perera explains why it is better to think of voucher programs “as subsidizing private school tuition for families that

CC3502 4.24.23 Monday

can *already* afford to send their kids to private school.” She adds that families in rural areas “don’t have any school choices besides their local public schools... While 82% of families have access to one or more private elementary schools within a 5 mile radius, that number drops to only 34% for families living in rural areas.” “(S)tatewide voucher programs.. do not boost academic achievement.... (and) students attending private schools do not have the same civil rights protections as students attending public schools.”

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