

Susan Kaeser: Ohio Senate's 'affordable' education approach meant bolstering private school aid while hindering public schools.

The June 25 Guest Column in the [Cleveland Plain Dealer](#) by Susan Kaeser uniquely describes how the Senate version of the State Budget shifts state funds to private school vouchers, hence increasing the property tax burden of school district residents. The 135th General Assembly has a rare opportunity to comply with the 26 year old Ohio Supreme Court decision in the DeRolph school funding case by fully funding the Cupp/Patterson Fair School Funding Plan. The Senate version of the State Budget dashes that hope by expanded funding of private school interests. Susan Kaeser reveals the Senate chicanery.

Ohio Senate's 'affordable' education approach meant bolstering private school aid while hindering public schools: Susan Kaeser

Jun. 25, 2023, Susan Kaeser **Guest columnist.**

CLEVELAND HEIGHTS, Ohio -- State tax revenue is up by more than \$840 million. Despite what The Plain Dealer describes as a "positive financial position", Senate Finance Committee chair Matt Dolan told The Plain Dealer, "Funding our public schools is important, but we need to be doing it in a way we can afford."

The Senate approved its version of the state budget on June 15, and we discovered his solution. The Senate budget plan cut from the House budget \$540 million for public education and shifted more of the responsibility for funding the basic cost of education to local taxpayers.

The Senate achieved its "affordable" solution by changing the way the state calculates the capacity of each community to fund its schools. They tinkered with the Fair School Funding plan's highly sensitive calculation of each community's capacity to fund its schools. By removing the median income factor from the calculation, school districts look wealthier than they are and receive less state aid.

Local taxpayers in about 90% of Ohio's school districts would have to contribute more to the basic cost of education than under the House version. The state might be able to afford this plan, but local communities cannot.

The solution perpetuates the long-standing problem with school funding in Ohio – over reliance on property taxes. These taxes lead to unequal education opportunities, and unfair treatment of property owners.

Senator Dolan's concern for affordability seems to stop with public education. The senate version of the budget goes on a spending spree when it comes to private education. Their budget proposes an additional \$372.5 million for private school vouchers over the already generous increase by the House.

The Senate took \$540 million away from public schools that serve more than 1.5 million students in every corner of the state and redirected most of it to about 198,000 students who attend 720 private schools, most of which are found in just 8 counties.

The Constitution makes public schools a priority. The Senate makes private schools the priority.

Dolan and Senate President Matt Huffman, co-creators of the senate budget plan are good at convincing their colleagues to vote against the interests of their communities and the people they represent.

Ten senators who supported this plan, including Huffman, represent the 46 Ohio counties that depend almost exclusively on public education. These counties have fewer than four private schools and 11 do not have any.

The House plan increased access to vouchers by raising the income eligibility to 450% of poverty. The austerity conscious Dolan and his colleagues took this expensive expansion further committing close to \$1 billion to private school tuition. They made vouchers available to everyone and increased the value of a voucher to \$8,400 per high school student. In 2019 the value was \$6,000. They remain unwilling to ensure that per pupil spending for public school students reaches \$7,100.

The funding priority demonstrated by this tradeoff shows affordability is in the eye of the beholder. By prioritizing the few and punishing the majority these state leaders exhibit a disregard for what a thriving democracy needs: a strong system of public education.

Fixing school funding has two requirements.

- Providing adequate state funds
- Reducing reliance on local property taxes.

Lawmakers have an excellent plan for promoting high quality education in the state if only they would make that their priority.

The House voted June 20 to reject the Senate budget proposal. A 6-person Conference Committee will now shape the final budget. It is not too late for them to be fair to public school students and to Ohio taxpayers, and to achieve some of the goals that the super majority says it cares about: attracting families, retaining residents, strong public schools, and developing our workforce.

Susan Kaeser is the education specialist for the League of Women Voters of Ohio. Based in Cleveland Heights, she has been focused on public education for 40 years. A classroom volunteer since 1988, she currently is also working with the Heights Coalition for Public Education.