

Some private school parents resist their school's requirement that parents enroll their children in the Ohio universal voucher scheme.

Some private school parents have disclosed that they are openly resisting their private school's policy that requires parents to use vouchers. One such response is included below. This particular pushback caused the private school officials to rescind the school's mandatory voucher sign-up policy.

Labels identifying the particular school have been redacted. Although the letters are somewhat long, it is worth a careful read. In the response from some parents to the members of the private school board in question, one of the concluding statements in the response is very compelling—"DESPITE THE UNDISPUTABLE ATTRACTION OF THIS POTENTIAL FUNDING, IT NEITHER JUSTIFIES PRESSURING FAMILIES TO BETRAY THEIR OWN VALUES NOR AMPLIFYING A PRORAM THAT WILL DO FAR MORE HARM THAN GOOD."

September 2023

Dear [REDACTED] Families,

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of welcoming [REDACTED], Executive Director, [REDACTED], to our first [REDACTED] Board Meeting of the school year. We asked [REDACTED] to attend so he could explain the opportunities available to [REDACTED] families through the new State of Ohio EdChoice Expansion Program.

As many of you know, EdChoice provides state funding toward private school education. But the new EdChoice Expansion Program differs in several important ways from the Traditional EdChoice Program. Two of the most important pieces of information I learned were 1) every family, regardless of income level or school district, is eligible to receive funding (specific amounts may vary); and 2) taking this funding in no way takes money out of any local school district's budget. I believe these facts are so important, they bear repeating - 1) this funding is available to EVERY family no matter income level, and 2) public school districts are NOT impacted by accepting this funding.

After the presentation, the board discussed the potential impact of this available funding to [REDACTED]. Let's consider the math. The smallest amount of scholarship available is \$650 per student. If all [REDACTED] families applied, that would be roughly \$40,000 to help offset the financial assistance [REDACTED] offers to its families. This year, [REDACTED] is offering an estimated total of \$364,000 in financial assistance to our families.

As you may know, last year we established the Sustainability Task Force which reviewed the financial health of [REDACTED] and made recommendations toward sustaining [REDACTED] for the next 25 years and beyond. Engaging in new income opportunities was one of the top recommendations of the STF. The EdChoice Expansion Program is a simple way to improve and sustain our financial health.

For these reasons, the Board has voted to require all families receiving financial assistance from [REDACTED] (including the Community Engagement Grant) to apply for the EdChoice Program. We also encourage all families paying full tuition to apply for this funding. Our new Business Manager, [REDACTED] is available at [REDACTED]@[REDACTED].org . She will be reaching out to help guide families through the process.

I am looking forward to a great year – a year of learning, growing, and caring for each other. Let's turn that caring into action by applying for the EdChoice Program.

Yours truly,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Board President

October 3, 2023

Dear [REDACTED] and members of the [REDACTED] board,

We are writing to express our concern about the newly adopted [REDACTED] policy to require or encourage families to use EdChoice vouchers. We believe this policy does not accord with [REDACTED]'s values and we request that the Board rescind this policy.

[REDACTED] Values and Our Values

We chose to send our children to [REDACTED] in large part because of its commitment to *tikkun olam*, the Jewish obligation to build a better and more equitable world. [REDACTED]'s mission states: "We believe that how one acts in the world with family, friends, community members, and strangers is also what makes one an exemplary human being. We engage in fixing the world, *tikkun olam*, according to Jewish ethics, values and ideals of American and global citizenship."

Before enrolling our children at [REDACTED], the [REDACTED] family communicated clearly to [REDACTED] that it would not seek or accept voucher funding from the State of Ohio, because pulling money away from public schools that need that funding runs contrary to their Jewish values. The [REDACTED] family has also never accepted school voucher funding and believes that doing so would contravene its Jewish values.

Our key concerns are that that the Board's policy: (1) puts pressure on [REDACTED] families to betray their own values by requiring them to seek out vouchers that they may be morally and ethically opposed to in order to obtain any financial aid; and (2) sends a message to the parents, the public, and other private and public schools that [REDACTED] endorses and is willing to benefit from the EdChoice program, even though the program runs counter to core Jewish values and basic tenants of social justice. If [REDACTED] families choose to seek out the EdChoice voucher, with the full information about the pluses and minuses of doing so, that is their choice. But we believe that,

at minimum, ██████ should not be requiring anyone else to do so, and its communications should not represent that the voucher program's expansion has no implications for public schools.

We recognize that the Board has a responsibility to ensure the financial sustainability of ██████ and that doing so is no easy task. We are deeply appreciative of the Board's effort to seek out new sources of funding. But ██████ needs to live its values in the course of doing so. As noted Jewish philosopher Jon Stewart is credited with saying, "If you don't stick to your values when they are being tested, they're not values."

Vouchers Hurt Public Schools

The letter to ██████ families stated (and then re-emphasized) that "public school districts are NOT impacted by accepting this funding." This belief—based on the presentation of Dan Dodds, part-time executive director of the Ohio Association of Independent Schools and lobbyist for gambling and fossil fuel interests—seems to underlie ██████'s shift in policy.

The contention that vouchers do not hurt public schools is false. The EdChoice Expansion included in this year's budget dramatically expanded eligibility for the EdChoice program, such that all families, living in any school district, can obtain EdChoice funding to support private school K-12 enrollment. Recent reporting found that the State has already received EdChoice Expansion applications totaling \$432 million for the 2023-2024 school year, with more applications coming in daily. Since money is fungible, that is nearly half a billion dollars of public money that is no longer available to support public schools.

For this budget cycle only, the amount available to public schools is set, and then the budget separately creates an open-ended entitlement to private school vouchers. (So in a narrowly technical sense, it is true that acceptance of vouchers does not reduce the amount of funding available to public schools in this current budget period only.) However, the EdChoice Expansion contains no budget cap or limit on the number of applications, so there is no way for the legislature to control how much the program will cost, and voucher applications have already exceeded the amount projected. Because EdChoice spending is already over projections, additional use of the vouchers will require cuts in other forms of government funding in this budget cycle, and, critically, it will also create tremendous pressure to cut public school funding in the next budget. Even in this current budget cycle, the popularity of EdChoice vouchers could be used by General Assembly leaders as justification for a mid-cycle amendment that would cut funding to public schools, particularly since both public schools and the EdChoice Expansion are funded through the same budget line.

To conclude that the use of EdChoice vouchers does not take money away from public schools, one must squint their eyes tightly to block out the broader context.

Voucher Use Enables Future Cuts to Public School Funding

It is no secret that key leaders of the General Assembly hope to keep expanding voucher programs and to cut funding to public schools. There is clear evidence that uptake of EdChoice Expansion vouchers will be used to justify further transfers of public funds from public to private schools, despite massive need for infrastructure funding in urban public schools.

Vouchers Are Inequitable

More than 90% of the EdChoice Expansion vouchers are going to students who are already attending private schools. As leading Ohio school finance expert (and member of the Columbus Jewish community) Dr. Howard Fleeter has said, “These recent changes reflect a pronounced change in the focus of Ohio’s voucher programs from one of expanding opportunity (for poor children) to one where the state simply pays for vouchers for students whose families have already demonstrated that they have the means to afford private school.” **By doing so, it prioritizes the needs of the 90% of Ohio’s students who attend public schools.**

Our families made the choice to send our children to [REDACTED]. We would never make that choice if it came at the expense of our neighbors who attend public schools. Columbus Public Schools serve nearly 50,000 students (80% of whom come from minoritized populations). Defunding public schools, as voucher expansion threatens to do, leads to predictable outcomes that are 2 deeply inequitable, expanding the educational disparities between high-income and lower-income school districts.

Lawsuits and Constitutional Issues

More than 250 school districts from around Ohio, led by Columbus (and including Bexley, Gahanna-Jefferson, and Westerville), have sued the State, arguing that the EdChoice program “effectively creates an ‘uncommon’, or private, system of schools unconstitutionally funded by taxpayers, siphons hundreds of millions of dollars of taxpayer funds into private (and mostly religious) institutions, and discriminates against minority students by increasing segregation in Ohio’s public schools.”

Notably, the largest beneficiary—by far—of the EdChoice program is the Catholic Church. Catholic dioceses have already contributed nearly a million dollars to oppose the reproductive choice amendment on the ballot in November, and they are expected to contribute millions more. Since money is fungible, this spending is being enabled by vouchers; it is taxpayer money boosting the Catholic Church’s effort to enshrine Catholic doctrine in civil law and limit the rights of all Ohioans. The funding also goes to other unaccountable private schools.

Conclusion

Despite the undisputable attraction of this potential funding, it neither justifies pressuring families to betray their own values nor amplifying a program that will do far more harm than good. If anything, EdChoice Expansion provides [REDACTED] with an opportunity to speak out, lead

with its values, and push back on the misleading narratives being spread by the Ohio Association of Independent Schools and others.

We hope this information has convinced you that the Board's policy should be rescinded. If not, we would ask you to call a Board meeting as soon as possible to hear from experts who could provide more information about the detrimental impact of the EdChoice Expansion program and further detail the information provided in this letter.

We spoke with Hon. Eric Brown, a member of the Columbus School Board and former Chief Justice of the Ohio Supreme Court (and an active member of Congregation Tifereth Israel). He said that he would be happy to come to a future Board meeting to discuss this issue or, in the alternative, to connect the Board with a suitable alternative speaker. We could also connect you with the educators, experts, and attorneys involved in the public school districts' litigation against the State (including members of the local Jewish community), who would strongly oppose the notion that the EdChoice Expansion does not harm public schools.

We understand that it may be impossible to call a Board meeting on short notice, but **we hope that you will communicate to parents as far in advance of Oct. 15 as possible that the policy is being reconsidered.**

Thank you for your consideration and for all you do for [REDACTED].

Sincerely,

[REDACTED] (parent of 3rd grader [REDACTED])

[REDACTED] (parent of 3rd grader [REDACTED])

From: [REDACTED]

Sent: Friday, October 13, 2023 4:09:31 PM

To: [REDACTED]

Cc: [REDACTED]

Subject: Re: [REDACTED] & EdChoice Vouchers

[REDACTED]

From the [REDACTED] Executive Committee: EdChoice Expansion

[REDACTED] is a pluralistic institution that embraces the lessons of our past, with a vision to see unlimited possibilities for the future. That is accomplished by understanding and embracing the

diversity of our community in the present. We are unapologetic in our defense of ensuring the continued vibrancy and presence of this unique school community.

With that in mind, this past August our Board passed a motion to require that all families receiving any type of tuition assistance need to apply for the newly revised EdChoice Expansion. We made that decision based on information that we reviewed and that made it clear that the funds for this year's EdChoice Expansion would not impact any funding for any school district. We are grateful for those families who have begun this process, and we welcome additional applicants. At the same time, as a pluralistic institution that embraces a diversity of thought and opinion, we are aware that some people were made extremely uncomfortable with that decision. While true that for this biennium budget there will be no impact on local school districts, it could have a negative impact down the road.

To that end, we need greater communal discussion and understanding of this newly revised plan. We are a community that needs to ensure that all opinions are heard and that decisions that are made are consistent with the ethical imperatives that define our people. In truth, there are multiple views that must be considered and then a decision needs to be made that finds wide acceptance inside our community.

To that end, we are rescinding our request that every family who is receiving tuition assistance of any kind this year needs to apply for EdChoice Expansion. Like the name implies it is a choice, and no one should be made to feel that either choice - to apply or not to apply - is necessarily a wrong one.

 Board Chair