

Swanton Local School Superintendent Lake's January 22 column in the Northwest Signal informs readers about the Ohio voucher scheme.

Swanton Superintendent Christopher Lake had an informative column published in the January 22 [Northwest Signal](#). His column provides a plethora of information regarding the flow of tax funds to unaccountable private schools via vouchers. He advises readers to share their thoughts about this matter with state officials.

Public education has been a part of Ohio's DNA since before it became a state in 1803. The Land Ordinance of 1785 stipulated that the 16th part of a township be set aside for a school. Two years later, the Northwest Ordinance stated, "schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." After achieving statehood, Ohio enshrined public education in Article VI, section 2 of the Ohio Constitution, which states, "The General Assembly shall...secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools throughout the state."

Today, Ohio's constitutionally required commitment to public education is under threat due to a universal voucher scheme embedded in the last biennium budget.

What started as a program to offer "school choice" to economically disadvantaged and minority students residing in so-called "failing" school districts has morphed into a billion-dollar giveaway of taxpayer funds to a private system that has zero accountability to Ohio taxpayers. Now, students, regardless of family income and the district in which they reside, are eligible to receive between \$6,165 and \$8,407 per year to attend a private school in Ohio. In her June 13, 2023, commentary in the Ohio Capital Journal, Marylou Johaneck noted that what started 20 years ago as a pilot program costing \$5 million has become a \$1.3 billion giveaway, meaning "roughly a quarter of the state's education budget is divvied up among roughly 10% of Ohio students." This means that the 1.6 million students who attend public schools must make do with less so that a small fraction of students from well-to-do families can save money on the private education they have chosen for their children. All told, since 1999 Ohio has sent over \$3 billion of taxpayer money to private schools.

The evidence that vouchers are really aimed at helping those who already have the means to do so is beginning to pile up. Stephen Dyer noted in his November 2023 article, "Ohio's Disastrous Voucher Explosion," that \$242 million of the \$272 million sent out to subsidize private school tuition went to families in the highest income brackets. That's nearly \$9 out of every \$10 going to subsidize families who could already afford to send their kids to private schools. As Dyer goes on to state, "even though the voucher program is now expected to cost more than \$1 billion, not a single penny can be (nor ever HAS been) audited by the state or any public entity."

As a taxpayer, you have the right to know how these funds are being expended, but your elected officials have created a system that removes all accountability for their preferred systems of private and for-profit education. On the other hand, your local public school must account for every penny spent year in and year out, and the details of those expenditures are readily available for anyone to see. Public schools undergo yearly audits of their finances and operations, and the detailed reports of the auditors' findings are available on the Auditor of State website for free.

The ECOT scandal showed Ohioans why accountability for the expenditure of public funds is so important. For those who have forgotten, let me provide a brief synopsis. ECOT was a for-profit online school founded by William Lager that, by 2015, boasted more “students” than any such school in the nation. The only problem was that many of ECOT’s students were not real, but when ECOT reported its enrollment numbers to the state, they were given dollars for each child they claimed.

And how did this innovative online school stack up against traditional public schools? David Pepper notes in a November 2023 article on the rise of ECOT that “the ‘school’ delivered atrocious results - the worst dropout rate of any school in the nation.” Yet ECOT continued to flourish because Lager was, in Pepper's words, “an enormous donor” who figured out “that it doesn’t take much for those politicians to use their power to work feverishly for private interests as opposed to the public good.” By the time Lager’s scam was exposed, over a billion dollars had disappeared. Even now, the state of Ohio is trying to recover nearly \$117 million from Lager years after ECOT was forced to close.

Our elected officials are on a years-long quest to divert millions upon millions of taxpayer dollars into a completely unaccountable system. Thus, it is up to those of us who value public education to push for a solution. That solution is currently making its way into our court system. A coalition of schools and a group called Vouchers Hurt Ohio has brought a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of Ohio’s universal voucher scheme. This suit represents the best opportunity for Ohio’s taxpayers to get the accountability from their elected officials that is sorely lacking right now. If you visit the Vouchers Hurt Ohio website, you can see if your local school district is participating in the suit. If they are, offer them encouragement and support their efforts. If they have not yet joined, ask them to consider signing on.

The flow of public money into the hands of for-profit and religious institutions is a long and twisted story and would take more space and time than is available to me. There are so many threads that I haven’t touched on. A closer look would show you how vouchers decimate the constitutional boundaries that call for the separation of church and state. How vouchers are bringing about further segregation of white students from their peers in minority groups. Finally, how vouchers allow discrimination against special education students to perpetuate. I encourage anyone who reads this and anyone who cares about public education to look further into this topic and share your thoughts with your elected officials on the state level. They need to hear from their constituents that you support public education and want accountability for the hundreds of millions of dollars they are giving away.

Chris Lake
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