

Private Schools, Public Money: School Leaders are Pushing Parents to Exploit Voucher Program—ProPublica.

ProPublica's Alec MacGillis was in Ohio a few weeks ago to investigate how some private schools are pushing constituents to take vouchers. The attached article is a result of his investigation. In the case of a Youngstown private school, the principal said students would not qualify for discounts if families did not apply for vouchers. In another case, those that didn't sign-up for vouchers were required to meet with school officials.

Private Schools, Public Money: School Leaders Are Pushing Parents to Exploit Voucher Programs

Voucher expansions have unleashed a flood of additional taxpayer dollars to the benefit of families already enrolled in private schools. In Ohio, some schools are now “strongly encouraging” parents to apply for vouchers, regardless of need or income.

by [Alec MacGillis](#) Jan. 31, 5 a.m. EST

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Tara Polansky and her husband were torn about where to enroll their daughter when they moved back to Columbus, Ohio, a year and a half ago. The couple, who work for a nonprofit organization and a foundation, respectively, were concerned about the quality of the city's public schools and finally decided to send her to Columbus Jewish Day School. It was a long drive out to the suburbs every day, but they admired the school for its liberal-minded outlook.

So Polansky was startled when, in September, the school wrote to families telling them to apply for taxpayer-funded vouchers to cover part of the \$18,000 tuition. In June, the Republican-controlled state government had expanded the state's private-school voucher program to increase the value of the vouchers — to a maximum of \$8,407 a year for high school students and \$6,165 for those in lower grades — and, crucially, to make them available to all families.

For years the program, EdChoice, targeted mostly lower-income students in struggling school districts. Now it is an entitlement available to all, with its value decreasing for families with higher incomes but still providing more than \$7,000 annually for high school students in solidly middle-class families and close to \$1,000 for ones in the wealthiest families. Demand for EdChoice vouchers has nearly doubled this year, at a cost to Ohio taxpayers of several hundred million additional dollars, the final tally of which won't be known for months.

That surge has been propelled by private school leaders, who have an obvious interest: The more voucher money families receive, the less schools have to offer in financial aid. The voucher revenue also makes it easier to raise tuition.

“The Board has voted to require all families receiving financial assistance ... to apply for the EdChoice Program. We also encourage all families paying full tuition to apply for this funding,” read the email from the Columbus Jewish Day School board president. She continued: “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.”

Polansky bridled at the direction. She had long subscribed to the main argument against private school vouchers: that they draw resources away from public education. It was one thing for her family to have chosen a private school. But she did not want to be part of an effort that, as she saw it, would decrease funding for schools serving other Columbus children. Together with another parent, she wrote a letter objecting to the demand.

“For this public money to go to kids to get a religious education is incredibly wrong,” she told ProPublica. “I absolutely don’t want to pull money out of an underfunded school district.”

For decades, Republicans have pushed, with mixed success, for school voucher programs in the name of parental choice and encouraging free-market competition among schools. But in just the past couple of years, vouchers have expanded to become available to most or all children in 10 states: Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Utah and West Virginia. The expansion has been spurred by growing Republican dominance in many state capitals, U.S. Supreme Court rulings loosening restrictions on taxpayer funding for religious schools, and parental frustration with progressive curricula and with public school closures during the coronavirus pandemic. Many of the expanded programs are experiencing high demand, which voucher advocates are taking as affirmation of their argument: that families would greatly prefer to send their children to private schools, if only they could afford them.

But much of the demand for the expanded voucher programs is in fact coming from families, many quite affluent, whose children were already attending private schools. In Arizona, the first state to allow any family to receive public funding for private schools or homeschooling, the majority of families applying for the money, about \$7,000 per student, [were not recently enrolled in public school](#). In Florida, [only 13%](#) of the 123,000 students added to the state’s expanded school-choice program had switched from public school.

In Ohio, the effects of the move toward looser eligibility in recent years was clear even prior to last summer’s big expansion: Whereas in 2018, fewer than a tenth of the students who were newly receiving vouchers that year had not attended a public school the year before, by 2022, more than half of students who were new to EdChoice were already in private schools.

That ratio will climb much higher in Ohio, now that the vouchers are available for families at all income levels and private schools are explicitly telling parents to apply. The surge in applications this school year has been so dramatic that it’s nearing the total enrollment for all private schools in the entire state.

At St. Brendan’s the Navigator, on the other side of the Columbus beltway from the Jewish Day School, the missive arrived on the last day of July. The letter, signed by the Rev. Bob Penhallurick, called the expanded vouchers a “tremendous boon to our school families and Catholic education across Ohio” and said that all families were “strongly encouraged to apply for and receive the EdChoice scholarship.” He noted that, depending on their income level, families could receive up to \$6,165 for each child — nearly covering the \$6,975 tuition. “Even a small scholarship is a major blessing for you, the school, and the parish,” he wrote.

And then he added, in italics, that if a family did not apply for the vouchers, “we will respect that decision,” but that “supplemental financial aid from the parish in this case will require a meeting” with either himself or another pastor at the school.

Asked about the directive and parents who might have been reluctant to comply, Columbus diocesan spokesperson Jason Mays said, “Parents are not required to apply for EdChoice.” Asked about the EdChoice expansion’s effect on enrollment, he said, “We expect to see continued growth and demand in the upcoming school year.”

At Holy Family School near Youngstown, the directive arrived a few days later, on Aug. 3. “As you are aware, ALL students attending Holy Family School will be eligible for the EdChoice Scholarship. We are requesting that all families register their child/ren for this scholarship as soon as possible,” wrote the school’s leadership. And then it added in bold: “It is imperative that you register for EdChoice for each of your students. We are waiting to send invoices until your EdChoice Scholarship has been awarded.”

In an interview at the school, Holy Family principal Laura Parise said the push to apply for EdChoice had succeeded. “One hundred percent of our students are on it,” she said. “We made it that way — we made our families fill out the form, and we’re going from there.”

Parise said that some families had been reluctant to apply, but that the school told them that if they did not do so, they could not qualify for any of the school’s discounts from its \$5,900 tuition, such as the ones Holy Family offers to second and third children from the same family. If parents still needed additional help beyond the vouchers, they could request it.

She said the school was not yet planning to raise tuition beyond what was already scheduled. “We didn’t want to take advantage of the situation,” she said. For now, she said, the state revenue that replaces some financial aid costs will simply make it possible for the school to spend more on other things. “We might be able to allocate some funds for other things curriculum wise to raise academics,” she said.

The expanded vouchers have not affected enrollment much yet, she said, since they had been made available after most families had already made school decisions for this year. “The true sign will come next year,” she said. “Our families from the previous year were coming anyway. We’ll see what happens next year, if we have an increase.”

Since private-school vouchers launched in Ohio nearly three decades ago, there has been a debate over who their true beneficiaries are. Then-Gov. George Voinovich, a Republican who had been mayor of Cleveland, pushed for the creation of a voucher program in that city in 1995, selling it as an outlet for disadvantaged families seeking an alternative to the city’s troubled schools.

But, within three years, while the program had grown to 4,000 students, private-school enrollment had [grown by only 300](#), suggesting that most participating families were already enrolled in private schools. By 2001, the share of Black students among voucher recipients in Cleveland was 53%, below the 71% ratio of Black students in public school.

The program was the first in the nation to provide public money for tuition at religious schools, and by 2000, virtually all Cleveland voucher recipients were using them at a religious private school (mostly Catholic) rather than secular ones. In 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court [narrowly rejected](#) a challenge to the Cleveland vouchers; the court ruled that because the vouchers could be used for religious or

nonreligious schools, they did not violate the constitutional prohibition against a state favoring religion. In the years that followed, vouchers spread to more districts around the state, taking on the name EdChoice. Initially, they were targeted at families in other districts deemed to be failing, but a decade ago, the state legislature — whose Republican majorities are buttressed by highly gerrymandered districts — made them available to lower-income students across the state.

Then came last year's big expansion, eliminating income limits and raising the value of the vouchers. It offers [major benefits](#) even to many solidly middle-class families: A family of four at 451% of the poverty level, or \$135,300 in household income, will receive \$5,200 per year for a K-8 student and \$7,050 per year for a high school student.

In the 2022-23 school year, before the expansion, EdChoice cost \$354 million, on top of the \$46 million for the Cleveland program, according to the state education department. That was already more than quadruple what EdChoice had cost a decade earlier.

The recent surge in applications will propel the price tag far higher. With the state still processing applications and accepting them until the end of June, it has not yet reported the total cost of the expansion, but in August legislative analysts projected that it would cost the state an additional \$320 million for this school year. The EdChoice line item is folded within the state's overall budget for K-12 education, which is roughly \$13 billion, and the EdChoice line item is not capped: The more families apply, the more it will cost.

The program's expansion in recent years has prompted another lawsuit, filed in 2022, this one from a coalition of 250 school districts. The suit argues that the vouchers worsen segregation, since private schools can choose their students (an [analysis](#) found that as of November, 90% of the new voucher recipients were white, far above the statewide share of white students, which is about two-thirds); that they violate the state Constitution's bars against religious control of public school funds (the [vast majority](#) of EdChoice funds go to Christian schools); and that the vouchers undermine the Ohio Constitution's promise of an adequate education for all by leaching money from public schools. Last month, a judge [denied the state's motion](#) to dismiss the case, rejecting the state's claims that the plaintiffs lacked standing and that all the claims have previously been decided by the state and U.S. supreme courts.

The leaching from public schools happens in two ways. Since public school funding formulas are based on enrollment, every student who uses a voucher to leave public schools means less money for them. But even if few students make that switch and most vouchers go to students already in private schools, the lawsuit's supporters say, the soaring cost of the vouchers inevitably leaves less money in the state education budget for public schools.

"It's soon going to be a billion dollars annually, and it's coming right out of the school funds," said William Phillis, the director of the coalition that filed the lawsuit and a former assistant state school superintendent. "It's just an egregious violation of the Constitution."

State Senate President Matt Huffman, a Republican from western Ohio who has led the push to expand vouchers, is blunt in his defense: Yes, the vouchers cost the state more money now, but they will save it money over time as families opt out of public schools, reducing the need to fund them. "In the long run,

the taxpayer saves a lot of money," he said [in an interview last fall](#). "I hope more people take advantage [of EdChoice] if they want to."

Aaron Churchill, the research director at the Ohio branch of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative-leaning education-reform think tank, said that even if more vouchers are going to families already enrolled in private school, those vouchers are still supporting school choice. These families have been paying taxes for years and not availing themselves of the schools those taxes paid for, he said, and it's only fair that at least some of that money go toward the education they chose for their children.

"It does follow the basic principle that when we talk about funding education, we're funding students, regardless of the choice their parents make," he said. "These dollars are for the kids, regardless of whether it's the public or private sector."

Polansky, the Columbus Jewish Day School mother, found an ally in Micah Berman, a fellow parent of a third grader. "One of the reasons we went to this school is because it does have a strong emphasis on teaching students about caring for the broader community and in particular caring for those that have more needs," he said. "And the idea that you would be putting some pressure on families to accept these vouchers that in effect take money out of school districts that need it strikes me as problematic and in conflict with that."

Together, they penned a three-page letter to the school leadership. "We chose to send our children to CJDS in large part because of its commitment to *tikkun olam*, the Jewish obligation to build a better and more equitable world," they wrote. "The Board's policy: (1) puts pressure on CJDS 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 CJDS endorses and is willing to benefit from the EdChoice program, even though the program runs counter to core Jewish values and basic tenets of social justice."

They added, "We recognize that the Board has a responsibility to ensure the financial sustainability of CJDS and that doing so is no easy task But CJDS needs to live its values in the course of doing so."

Soon after they sent the letter, school leaders lifted the requirement that families on financial aid apply for the vouchers. But Polansky worried that the order had already had its desired effect in spurring applications. "Even though it was rescinded, my sense is that a lot of the damage was already done," she said.

Berman said that many parents still may miss the broader picture. "It's easy not to think of the systemic impact when you're thinking about individual families or individual schools," he said. "My fear is that this is sort of the point: to make this as attractive as possible for families to take more of the money, because it increases the incentive to keep taking money from the schools that need it."

The school's interim director, Rabbi Morris Allen, responded to inquiries with a brief statement: "We are aware of all Ohio educational guidelines. We work continually to ensure that our school can provide its unique pluralistic and accessible education to any student who desires to benefit from our Jewish vision and mission."

Visits to both CJDS and St. Brendan to ask other parents what they made of the voucher debate, in the parking lot during school drop-off and pickup, were unsuccessful: At both schools, administrators (and a

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heavily armed guard at CJDS) came outside to tell this reporter to vacate the premises. Regardless of how much public funding the schools receive, they are, after all, private.

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Alec MacGillis is a reporter for ProPublica. In recent years, his coverage has focused on gun violence, economic inequality and the pandemic-era schools crisis.

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