

February 28 WOSU 89.7 FM radio indicates that pupil enrollment in school districts is not dropping but the number of vouchers taken has increased exponentially in several Franklin County school districts.

30 Olentangy students were taking vouchers in the 2022-2023 school year, but 713 took vouchers this school year. In Upper Arlington, the number of voucher students increased from 11 to 260.

The audio is available online at wosu.org: [School voucher usage explodes in suburban Columbus districts | WOSU Public Media](#) . The companion web story is attached below.

School voucher usage explodes in suburban Columbus districts

WOSU 89.7 NPR News | By [Allie Vugrincic](#)

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In 2023, Ohio lawmakers expanded the state's EdChoice voucher program, making scholarships for private schools available to all K-12 students. Over 66,000 new families took advantage of the enlarged program, [at a cost of \\$412 million](#).

Recent [data from the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce](#) shows, however, that thousands of students did not transfer out of public schools.

In the 2022-2023 school year, 30 students who live in the Olentangy Local School District received EdChoice scholarships or "vouchers" for private schools. This school year, 713 students who live in the district received vouchers – a 2,277% increase.

But the district's enrollment also grew by about 500 students.

For most other Franklin County school districts, including Columbus, South-Western, and Gahanna-Jefferson, state data shows hundreds more vouchers, but no apparent mass exodus of students. Only one school district in Franklin County saw a decrease in vouchers this year: Whitehall, with two less than the previous school year.

In the Dublin school district, nearly 500 more students received vouchers this year versus last year. In Upper Arlington, the number jumped from 11 to about 260.

When asked about the spike, both districts responded with confusion.

Officials were not aware that many students who live in their districts were getting vouchers. And districts did not see a corresponding drop in enrollment. In fact, enrollment grew as expected.

Olentangy reached the conclusion: "based on your data, and by our own deduction, if we are growing in overall enrollment in Olentangy Schools, and scholarship enrollment grew by 670 students from FY23 to FY24, that increase in scholarships, especially EdChoice Expansion, are families with students currently attending private school."

[A Flourish table](#)

The [expanded EdChoice program](#) passed by lawmakers last year both opened up eligibility to every Ohio child and raised the amount of money available to families.

A family of four making up to 450% of the federal poverty level, or \$135,000, can get more than \$6,165 per student for kindergarten to 8th grade. The same family can get \$8,407 for private high school.

Less money is available to higher-income families, but even the wealthiest Ohioans can get more than \$900 for high school.

Supporters of the voucher program, like Troy McIntosh, Director of the Center for Christian Virtue's Ohio Christian Education Network, argue that EdChoice allows parents to choose what is best for their kids and tethers state funding to a student, not a district.

McIntosh agrees that most new vouchers in the 2023-2024 school year came from families already in private schools. He said that the expansion was passed in the summer, which was a little late for many families to decide to switch their children out of public schools.

He says his organization's member schools can't require families to apply for vouchers, but that they can make parents aware of the scholarships.

"I think it's appropriate for the schools to inform parents about the availability of the scholarship. And I think most of them are doing that," McIntosh said.

McIntosh believes the scholarships are one solution to increasingly diverging views about education that can be seen in school board races across the state and country. He also contends that education is better when it's competitive.

"We believe that opening up the educational landscape for Ohio students to a more competitive, market-based system is going to spur that kind of innovation."

"I think it's appropriate for the schools to inform parents about the availability of the scholarship. And I think most of them are doing that."

Troy McIntosh, director of Ohio Christian Education Network

But not everyone agrees.

A [2022 lawsuit in Franklin County Court of Common Pleas](#) argues that the EdChoice expansion is unconstitutional. Dozens of public school districts have signed on, including Columbus, Bexley, Gahanna-Jefferson, Reynoldsburg, South-Western, Westerville and Worthington.

William Phillis, Executive Director of the Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy in School Funding, which is spearheading the lawsuit, said Ohio's constitution calls for a "thorough and efficient system of common schools" and prohibits the state from funding private, and specifically religious, schools.

Vouchers have, at times, been used to segregate, and Phillis argues that's happening again.

"Recent data is that a disproportionate percentage of the people taking the vouchers are white," Phillis said. "And so, the voucher program has a segregating effect. It segregates people along racial lines, ethnic lines, economic lines."

It's true that in Franklin County, most scholarship recipients are white, though generally, the racial breakdown for vouchers in a given school district is similar to that in the U.S. Census.

But Phillis also takes issue with scholarships going to families who, it seems, could already afford to send their children to private schools.

"As a taxpayer, I'm subsidizing somebody's choice to send their kid to a private school," he said.

To that, McIntosh says, "So what? You know, these are citizens of Ohio who are every bit the taxpayer that someone who attends a public school is. And so why shouldn't the state be funding those children?"

"As a taxpayer, I'm subsidizing somebody's choice to send their kid to a private school."

William Phillis, director of Ohio Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

Districts that weren't aware of increases in vouchers in their communities also didn't note a change in funding. Funding goes straight from the state to private schools, meaning public schools can't easily track scholarships, but also don't miss any money.

With more time to apply for EdChoice, next year could be different.

"What you're going to see is the vast majority of these scholarships are going to go to families who are seeking out new choices for their child," McIntosh predicts.

The state has estimated that with administrative costs, next year's program will likely exceed \$1 billion. Applications are already open.

Allie Vugrincic

Allie Vugrincic is a reporter for 89.7 NPR News. She comes to Columbus from her hometown of Warren, Ohio, where she was a reporter, features writer and photographer for four years at the Tribune Chronicle and The Vindicator newspapers.