

Cleveland Plain Dealer Editorial: The facts are in. Instead of promoting choice, much of the nearly \$400 million for expanded Ohio school vouchers went to those already attending private schools.

The Plain Dealer Editorial concludes that: “The data suggest it [Ohio’s EdChoice Expansion] became just a big taxpayer subsidy for those students already in private schools.”

The facts are in. Instead of promoting choice, much of the nearly \$400 million for expanded Ohio school vouchers went to those already attending private schools: editorial

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Last June, when the Ohio House passed Amended Substitute House Bill 33, the two-year state budget, sending it to Gov. Mike DeWine’s desk for his signature, House Majority leadership celebrated the “landmark” expansion of EdChoice school vouchers, loosening income caps to make voucher benefits available to all Ohio families.

“Along with funding public education, the budget makes a landmark investment in school choice with a universal voucher program,” the statement from House Republican leadership said. “This program is designed to safeguard lower-income families and offers options beyond traditional public schools. By expanding access to vouchers, Ohio ensures parents can make the best decisions for their children’s education.”

But data from implementation of this “landmark investment in school choice ... designed to safeguard lower-income families” suggest it did very little to provide school choice or to help low-income families.

Instead, parents in affluent communities like Rocky River, Westlake and Bay Village with kids already in private and parochial schools appear to have taken immediate advantage of the new eligibility rules. Families of four up to 450% of poverty levels (that is, earning up to \$135,000 a year) now qualify for full taxpayer-funded vouchers, and those making more money qualify for partial vouchers.

Ohio’s legislature, to be true to its stated school-choice motive, should rewrite the rules to guarantee that this money goes to children in underperforming schools, possibly relying on state report cards to set the standard.

Cleveland.com’s Laura Hancock looked at before-and-after numbers and found that students on EdChoice vouchers shot up from 16 to 309 in the Rocky River school district; 41 to 581 in Westlake; and 13 to 229 in Bay Village.

Hancock then compared public-school enrollment trends to judge if this was primarily a move out of public schools, or a subsidy for kids already in private and parochial schools.

The evidence points strongly to the latter. Rocky River public school enrollment dropped by only 22 students, not 309. Bay Village enrollment dropped by 30 students, not 229. Westlake schools recorded 19 fewer students this year compared with last academic year -- not 581. Similar patterns

were seen in other affluent school districts, from Strongsville and North Royalton to Brecksville-Broadview Heights.

By contrast, in the Cleveland public schools, where more than 8,000 students now get school vouchers through the much-older Cleveland school voucher program, which dates to 1996, those on EdChoice vouchers increased only slightly, from 9 to 28.

In even more impoverished East Cleveland, EdChoice recipients dropped from 12 last academic year to less than 10 this year.

And the money is now almost gone.

“The legislature budgeted \$397.8 million for EdChoice-Expansion this year,” Hancock reports. “As of Feb. 26, the state had spent \$387.5 million.”

Advocates of the universal voucher program suggested to Hancock that, as word gets out, more people will use the vouchers as intended next school year, to switch from low-performing public schools to a private or parochial option.

But it seems unlikely those now on the EdChoice expansion vouchers would be displaced to make room for lower-income students.

In other words, lacking conscious, targeted efforts to make sure low-income Ohioans in poor-performing schools primarily benefited, Ohio’s EdChoice expansion as implemented was not the school-choice program Statehouse leaders promised.

The data suggest instead it became just a big taxpayer subsidy for those students already in private schools.

That should outrage every Ohio taxpayer -- and every parent of students in struggling districts who were supposed to benefit.

Also raising red flags were the absence of reciprocal obligations on the part of private and parochial schools taking these taxpayer-funded vouchers to show they are a higher-quality alternative to public schools.

The lack of transparency and data-reporting guardrails forces parents making “school choice” for academic reasons, rather than out of religious or other motivations, to blindly assume that a private or parochial school is the best choice, without actual data on educational performance.

This is particularly troubling given Ohio’s history of funding for-profit charter schools without such guardrails. That’s how the now-shuttered Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow managed to make off with \$117 million in wrongly paid taxpayer funds, based on a 2022 state audit -- mostly for falsely reporting students ECOT never had.

The General Assembly needs to revisit its universal vouchers program to ensure that this nearly \$400 million in Ohio taxpayer money is buying true school choice as promised for students mired in poor-performing public schools who most need quality alternatives.

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