

Cleveland.com: House Bill 339 would possibly cost Ohio taxpayers \$239 million per year.

Reporter Laura Hancock, in a March 5 article, indicates that HB339 would likely cost Ohio taxpayers \$239 million. HB339 would provide tax money to parents who send their kids to non-chartered, non-public schools. This ilk of private schools is currently not eligible for any public funds. These schools are exempt from nearly all state regulations due to their religious beliefs that they should be free of any government regulations. They operate without public transparency and accountability; yet HB339 would publicly fund them via legislation that sends tax funds to parents.

The Senate leadership via the State Budget Bill (HB33) wouldn't fully fund the Cupp/Patterson Fair Funding Plan for school districts but gave a substantial increase to vouchers and made every student eligible for them for use at the chartered private institutions.

Where is the taxpayer outrage?

More tuition cash? Ohio bill would create educational savings accounts for families with kids in 500 private schools

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An Ohio House bill would create educational savings accounts for families with kids attending a specific category of private schools and possibly cost Ohio \$239 million a year, according to one estimate.

By Laura Hancock, cleveland.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio – An Ohio House bill would create educational savings accounts funded with taxpayer dollars for families of kids attending a specific category of private schools, a move that one estimate projects would cost the state \$239 million a year.

House Bill 339 is sponsored by state Rep. Gary Click, a Sandusky County Republican and pastor. Click's church has a school that falls under the category of schools targeted by his bill. But he said that he personally takes no income from the school, its teachers are paid little and no one is enriching themselves from the school.

HB 339 comes as the General Assembly has increased funding and eligibility of state-funded scholarships to students in private schools. Public school advocates disagree with the increases in funding and eligibility for private schools because they said there isn't unlimited funding to keep both systems going over the long term. Private school advocates believe that since they're paying taxes to support local schools, some of the money should be returned if they choose private schools.

Non-chartered private school students are not eligible for Ohio's voucher programs, but Click's proposal would send them public dollars anyway through what he's calling "educational savings accounts" that the state would fund. Under the bill, funding for those accounts would actually be higher than the maximum scholarship available to pre-high school kids in the voucher program the legislature expanded in the state budget last year.

Click said he's sponsoring the bill after a request from the Buckeye Christian School Organization, a group that represents many of the so-called "non-chartered, non-public schools" and that Click used to lobby for prior to his time in the legislature.

Scott DiMauro, president of the Ohio Education Association, said that his organization opposes the bill.

"Education savings accounts are just vouchers by another name," he said. "They're taking limited resources away from the nearly 90% of Ohio's kids who attend our public schools. It's bad enough that there are schools that are receiving hundreds of millions of dollars in voucher money that don't have the same accountability standards as our public schools, when it comes to both academic and fiscal oversight and accountability."

DiMauro noted that the non-chartered private schools have even less oversight.

The bill has had two committee hearings since its Jan. 16 introduction.

What are 'non-chartered' private schools?

Private schools in Ohio fall into one of two categories: chartered, of which there are 715, and non-chartered, of which there are 585.

Unchartered private schools are ineligible for school vouchers, which is why Click said he wanted to create educational savings accounts to help families out.

Different than Catholic and other private schools, unchartered private schools don't seek a charter from the state "because of truly held religious beliefs," according to state law. The schools are legal because a 1976 Ohio Supreme Court decision determined that state regulations can be unreasonable for a private school's autonomy.

Unchartered private schools must track student attendance and their teachers must have bachelors' degrees, among a handful of other requirements. But the schools overall have fewer regulations compared to chartered private schools.

At chartered private schools, officials must submit paperwork to the state to demonstrate how they decide curriculum and ensure it's being followed; show how teachers are credentialed; and demonstrate educational performance and areas of improvement based on data collection and analysis, among other requirements.

(On the continuum of education, public schools are most regulated, followed by chartered private schools. Unchartered private and home schools are regulated the least.)

How does the bill work?

Under the bill, families would receive an educational savings account award for each child in an unchartered school in an amount that's 90% of a key figure from the state's education funding formula: the statewide average base cost per pupil.

Next school year, that figure will be \$8,242; and 90% of that amount is \$7,418.

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For comparison, in the state's largest private school voucher program, EdChoice-Expansion, full scholarship amounts are \$6,167 for grades K-8 and \$8,407 for grades K-12. Upper-income families only receive partial scholarships, based on family size and income.

The Legislative Service Commission, the nonpartisan staff that conducts research for the legislature, provided a fiscal estimate for HB 339. It says that if all 32,000 estimated students in these schools obtain an educational savings account, the state will spend \$238 million annually.

Click disagrees with this figure, estimating the total will cost closer to \$75 million a year.

If the bill is adopted as written, funding the accounts would cost the state more than it provides for younger students who receive the maximum award under a voucher program lawmakers expanded last summer to cover near-universal eligibility. Full scholarship amounts in that program are \$6,167 for grades K-8 and \$8,407 for grades K-12.

Click also said that he's going to introduce some amendments that will narrow the scope of his bill. Some families register their homeschool with the state as an unchartered private school. Click said that he plans a change that would say the unchartered school would have to be in a different location than a student's home, among other potential amendments.

The Legislative Service Commission's fiscal estimate says the \$238 million could be offset by an increase in personal income tax revenue to Ohio of between \$5 million and \$8 million a year, because HB 339 would end a tuition tax credit currently allowed in the state law if families choose a savings account.

Why now? Click said that in some smaller Ohio communities, there are just two private schools. With a recent change in one of the state's five private school scholarship programs, families are increasingly choosing the chartered private school over the unchartered because they can get the vouchers. That's creating hardship on the unchartered schools.

"So now it's had a desperate impact on the non-chartered, nonpublic schools," he said. "It wasn't intentional."

Laura Hancock covers state government and politics for The Plain Dealer and cleveland.com.

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