

Jan Resseger's March 28 blog: Will untenable voucher expansion threaten public school funding in Ohio?

Jan Resseger's March 28 blog pulls together various news articles that point to the threat of the runaway EdChoice voucher scheme to the public common school system.

The threat is real. Voucher puppeteers such as the Koch Family, Betsy DeVos, Americans for Prosperity, American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and other individuals and organizations of their ilk are using the voucher scheme to destroy the public common school system and public education retirement systems. They seem to care not a whit for the folks or the public good.

Will Untenable Voucher Expansion Threaten Public School Funding in Ohio?

Posted on [March 28, 2024](#) by [janresseger](#)

The *Cleveland Plain Dealer's* [Laura Hancock reports](#) this week that the enormous expansion of EdChoice vouchers in Ohio will bring the state's investment in its five private school tuition voucher programs to at least a billion dollars by the end of Fiscal Year 2024 on October 1. In Ohio, a total of 152,118 students, according to Hancock's data, now attend private schools using tax funded vouchers.

Ohio began offering private school vouchers to students in a relatively small program in Cleveland in 1996. Ohio now has five school voucher programs, one program for children with autism, another for students with disabilities, the original Cleveland program, and two statewide school voucher programs, including EdChoice Expansion by which any student can now qualify to carry public tax dollars to pay private school tuition.

This year, after the legislature expanded eligibility for EdChoice vouchers in the state budget—by raising the income qualification to include students with family income up to \$135,000 and offering partial vouchers to students in families with income above \$135,000—the number of students and the diversion of state tax dollars skyrocketed. Hancock explains: “As of March 18, state spending on all five scholarship programs was \$980.4 million, with several months yet to go in the state's fiscal year.”

In a column that appeared in *Crain's Cleveland Business*, education reporter [Patrick O'Donnell documents](#) how voucher use has grown in the last decade: “Voucher use in Ohio has grown more than 400 percent in the last 10 years, from 30,000 students in 2013-14 to more than 120,000 today. The state tax dollars going to families and private schools have grown from \$175 million then to potentially \$1 billion a year now. The most dramatic leap... came just this school year after the Ohio legislature eliminated the last income cap for families to receive a voucher in the summer of 2023.”

There are a lot of explanations and rationalizations and lies floating around right now to justify the enormous diversion of tax dollars from the state budget, and eventually the shortage of funds needed for the public schools that serve 1.6 million public school students. There are also a lot of gullible people who believe the fast-talking cynical people who are trying to obscure what's happening.

Did the State Intend that the EdChoice Voucher Expansion Would Create Opportunity for Poor Students?

On March 8, the [Plain Dealer's Editorial Board](#) quoted Ohio House Majority leadership celebrating last June's expansion of EdChoice vouchers: "(T)he budget makes a landmark investment in school choice.... 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." The newspaper's editorial board immediately and explicitly refutes that myth: "But data from implementation of this 'landmark investment in school choice... designed to safeguard lower-income families' suggests it did very little to provide school choice or to help low-income families. Instead, parents in affluent communities... with kids already in private and parochial schools appear to have taken immediate advantage of the new eligibility rules." The editors appear to recognize that by raising the income-eligibility qualification to 450% of the federal poverty level, our legislators were qualifying upper income children for the vouchers, while doing nothing to give poor kids greater access.

However, in a follow-up column, the *Plain Dealer's* executive editor, [Chris Quinn](#) reinforces the assumption that legislators meant to help poor kids. He assumes the whole scheme was just a mistake—that our legislators tried to help poor kids but merely made an error in the program's design: "Lawmakers and Gov. Mike DeWine changed the rules on school vouchers this year with a goal many find laudable, to give students in under-performing school districts a chance for a better education. Once the rules went into place, however, the vouchers were overwhelmingly grabbed by people in good districts like Rocky River. Did lawmakers or DeWine admit they got it wrong, that the rules they created did not help the people they say were their targets?... The answer is no." (We'll ignore for the moment that Quinn also trusts test scores as the definition of a "good" school district and calls the districts that serve our poorest kids "under-performing.")

Let's get real and assume that legislators knew what they were doing when they designed a program to help upper income families qualify for private school vouchers. Hancock quotes Bill Phillis, who leads the Vouchers Hurt Ohio lawsuit, "We have a situation where the lower-income people of the state are subsidizing the wealthy, picking up the tuition costs of the wealthy."

So... What Was the Real Goal of the Ohio Senate's Voucher Expansion Plan?

It would appear that key legislative leaders believe in the ideology of parental choice. Some are also promoting parochial schools. Patrick O'Donnell reports that, "more than 95 percent of voucher dollars in Ohio go to ... religious schools." He also notes that, "After years of enrollment declines and closures, private school operators, particularly religious schools, are filling seats, adding students and even looking to expand." O'Donnell notes that Senate President Matt Huffman hopes, "the latest increase in voucher will help older (private) schools build up enrollment and even add new classrooms." Key voucher-supporting lobbyists share Huffman's goal: "Some school choice advocates, including the conservative Buckeye Institute, have started calling for the state to start paying for private school construction, as it does with public schools. Brian Hickey, executive director of the Ohio Catholic Conference, said schools would welcome help building schools in rural areas that don't have existing Catholic schools."

ProPublica's [Alec MacGillis](#) points out that this year's voucher expansion has caused private schools to pressure parents already paying tuition for their students to apply for state vouchers to reduce the schools' own scholarship costs: "The 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.”

O’Donnell quotes Senate President Matt Huffman defending private schools as being more accountable than public schools: “Huffman said it’s not really fair for public schools to call for the same accountability for private schools because public school districts never close. Private schools have had to close after losing students, he said.” Describing public schools, Huffman continued, “They’re not held accountable... They in fact, continue to operate, especially schools that don’t perform academically. That’s not true for private schools, because parents take their kids out.” (Michigan State University’s [Josh Cowen shows](#) that parents haven’t been an effective source of accountability. He presents academic research showing that students fall behind academically when their parents use vouchers to send the children to private schools.)

Does the State Really Have So much Money We Don’t Need to Worry about the Cost of Vouchers?

Hancock quotes Ohio Senate Education Committee Chair, Senator Andy Brenner, who doesn’t worry about the diversion of a billion dollars from the state budget because, “Tax revenues over the past year have exceeded projections.” “There’s plenty of money. It’s not an issue.” She also quotes John Fortney, a spokesman for Senate President Huffman, lying about the impact of the voucher expansion on the state budget: “These scholarships save the state money compared to the average cost of per pupil spending.” Fortney is trying to make the public forget that while each voucher is worth less than the state’s per-pupil base cost in public schools, voucher students are not leaving public schools and saving the state money as Fortney claims. Earlier this month, [Laura Hancock reported](#) that in Cuyahoga County, voucher use, “has increased nearly four-fold, from about 2,300 students last year to nearly 9,200 this year. Those (public school) districts, however, have not seen a corresponding loss in student population, indicating that most of the families newly benefiting from the vouchers were already enrolled in private schools, rather than fleeing a school district....” The state has simply established a new annual gift of tax dollars to thousands of new families to offset the tuition they are already paying.

Fortney also justifies the voucher expansion by reminding the public that legislators have also supported public schools by implementing the first two parts of the three year phase-in of a new public school funding formula—investing, he says, \$2 billion into public education. His point? We supported the public schools in the state budget, so why shouldn’t we support private schools? Fortney neglects to mention, however, that Ohio had been operating for years without an adequate and equitable school funding plan before the legislature began phasing in the state’s new Fair School Funding Plan, and three years ago, under Huffman’s leadership, legislators refused to establish the new public school funding formula under separate enabling legislation. They insisted that it be phased in one step at a time over three biennial budgets (six years) in order not to lock future legislators into a firm public school budgetary commitment. The *Ohio Capital Journal’s* [Susan Tebben quoted](#) Senator Huffman reiterating his commitment to a step-by-step phase-in: “Senate President Matt Huffman said, ‘the out-year costs are still a significant concern.’” Legislative leaders insisted on letting future legislatures off the hook in case of a future economic recession or a future change of plans.

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A lot of people in Ohio today worry that, as a result of an uncapped commitment to future EdChoice vouchers for upper-income families, the rising cost of the vouchers might well constitute that future change of plans. Won't the rapidly growing expense of EdChoice vouchers threaten the final phase-in and future funding of the Fair School Funding Plan, which was designed to make good the Ohio Constitution's promise of a thorough and efficient system of common schools for the 90 percent of Ohio's young people enrolled in the public schools?