

August 13 Cleveland.com—Private school vouchers: Scholarships last school year cost Ohio \$966.2 million—and counting.

The voucher expenditure data in the Cleveland.com article that should alarm Ohio taxpayers.

In school year 2023-2024 as of August 7, 2024

- \$966.2 million and counting

In school year 2022-2023

- EdChoice expansion vouchers cost Ohioans \$124.4 million. In school year 2023-2024 the same program cost \$405 million.

Senator Andrew Brenner, Chairman of the Senate Education Committee, one of Ohio's high profile voucher apologists is quoted in the article defending vouchers: "The families have paid taxes to support public schools that they do not attend. They should be able to use some tax money for school choice."

I personally have paid taxes for 40 years while having no children in school those years. Am I entitled to a tax rebate/refund for some kind of education experience, maybe international travel?

Private school vouchers: Scholarships last school year cost Ohio \$966.2 million – and counting

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By Laura Hancock, cleveland.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio - Vouchers for private school tuition – which the legislature expanded to include all families, regardless of income – have cost taxpayers \$966.2 million so far for last school year.

The number isn't final. Some families didn't apply until the last several days of the fiscal year that ended June 30, and those applications are still being processed, said Lacey Snoke, a spokeswoman for the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce. Final numbers won't be available until October.

The total is also lower than what the department reported in March, when it was \$980 million – closer to the \$1 billion mark. But the March numbers were based on estimates of what the state believed it would pay for scholarships at the time, The \$966.2 million figure is what the state has already paid in scholarships as of Aug. 7, Snoke said.

Nevertheless, the amount spent thus far tips estimates from the Legislative Service Commission, the General Assembly's nonpartisan research staff, that Ohio would spend \$964.5 million for the 2023-2024 year across all five voucher programs.

Critics of the expansion to universal vouchers have been closely watching the figure. During the 2022-2023 school year, before universal vouchers, Ohio spent just \$124.4 million on the specific voucher program that is now available universally. During the 2023-2024 school year, that program, called EdChoice-Expansion, has cost \$405 million thus far.

Ohio has five private school scholarship programs with different eligibility criteria.

Some help students who have special needs or are on the autism spectrum. The Cleveland Scholarship, the state's oldest voucher program, is available for all students who live in the boundaries of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. Education Choice scholarships are for students who live in the boundaries of a low-performing school district.

Education Choice-Expansion scholarships are based on family income, regardless of school district performance. Families previously only qualified for the scholarship if they earned up to 250% of the federal poverty level, or \$75,000 for a family of four in the 2022-2023 school year.

But the legislature created universal eligibility for the EdChoice-Expansion scholarship, starting in 2023-2024 school year. Higher-income families now qualify for at least a portion of the scholarship.

Participation across all five scholarship programs has nearly doubled year over year, driven primarily by more families receiving EdChoice-Expansion vouchers.

About \$4 million to \$6 million was overpaid to EdChoice, EdChoice-Expansion, the Cleveland program last school year, due to a calculation error that also resulted in over and underpayments of other schools. The legislature doesn't intend to claw that money back, but it will not provide the same overfunding in the future, lawmakers have said.

Enrollment in EdChoice-Expansion ballooned last school year, compared to the previous year, not necessarily because families were choosing to attend private school for the first time, but because the income limits had flexed to cover wealthier families already in private schools.

Furthermore, the General Assembly expanded scholarship amounts for many scholarship categories, in addition to income eligibility.

Full scholarship amounts for EdChoice, EdChoice-Expansion and Cleveland programs are \$6,167 for grades K-8 and \$8,407 for grades 9-12, up from \$5,500 for K-8 and \$7,500 in 9-12 in the 2022-2023 school year.

Christina Collins, executive director of Honesty for Ohio Education, an organization that is fighting against conservative ideas in public education, said that the spending figure is not a surprise.

"This is exactly what we expected to see was an explosion in the vouchers," she said. "What we're finding based on the data is these were students already in the schools because we aren't seeing decreases in public school attendance across the state."

Ohio does not cap the amount of tuition participating private schools can charge. Many private schools are pressuring parents to take the vouchers, while also increasing tuition rates.

The Department of Education and Workforce prohibits schools from requiring parents to apply for vouchers if they do not want to. However, if parents have difficulty paying for the tuition, private schools can require the family apply for a voucher before they can seek financial aid from the school.

"It's becoming a big money maker for these private schools because tuition isn't capped in Ohio," Collins said. "It makes Ohio kind of like the Wild West."

State Sen. Andrew Brenner, a Columbus-area Republican who chairs his chamber's education committee, defends vouchers. The families have paid taxes to support public schools that they do not attend. They should be able to use some tax money for school choice, he said.

The highest earners only qualify for 10% of the full scholarship amount, which would be \$840 if they had children in high school. That's a relatively small amount of money when looking at overall education spending, he said.

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Lawmakers budgeted about \$9.6 billion in state funds to spend on traditional K-12, charter schools and vocational schools in 2023-2024. Spending nearly \$1 billion on private school scholarships is eye-popping for many, but not for Brenner.

Brenner said that when considering federal funds and local property taxes, public schools get over \$20 billion a year. The spending on private schools is just a small percentage of that.

“Yet what are we getting for our return of investment on that? We’re getting a lot of kids who are getting educated, probably a significantly higher rate than the ones that we’re spending the (rest of the money) on,” he said.

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