

In the August 26 Pepperspective, David Pepper sketches the development of the Ohio common school system and shows then how some politicians have split state school funding into three broken systems.

The education legacy of the Ohio General Assemblies for the first quarter of the 21st century will be how they deconstructed the constitutionally required common school system. But then the legacy of the judiciary for the second quarter of the 21st century might be how the court restored education to the constitutional framework of the 1851 Ohio constitutional provision for the public common school.

Pepper's piece is useful in evaluating the Ohio universal voucher scheme.

[The Big Picture: How They Broke Education in Ohio](#)

Turning a Top-Ranked System of Common Schools into Three Broken Systems

[David Pepper](#)

Aug 26, 2024

In 1825, Ohio was the first state in the nation to establish a system of local schools, funded by local property taxes. Then in 1850, Ohioans enshrined their priority of public education directly into the state's Constitution:

*"The General Assembly shall make such provisions, by taxation, or otherwise, as, with the income arising from the school trust fund, **will secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools throughout the state.**"*

(Art. VI, Section 2)

No doubt, one of the reasons Ohio emerged as a leading state in the nation **overall** came from this early and unique commitment to public education. And it was a system that served Ohio well for generations. Even as recently as 2010, Ohio had the 5th highest ranked system of public education in the nation.

And then something happened...

Politicians and a handful of their big donors (who would soon become even bigger donors), eyeing the substantial state and local dollars generated to fund this historic commitment, started treating those funds as their own piggy bank.

And what they did was take *the* single system of public education that was performing so well, and divert as much money out of it as they could—converting it into profits and political donations along the way.

This happened in two waves, which created TWO NEW SYSTEMS of schools (neither of which are "common") beyond the clear mandate of "**a**" system of "common schools."

System #2:

The first wave created a separate system of **for-profit charter schools**.

And quickly, these for-profit schools followed a consistent pattern: huge dollars diverted from public schools, [far higher spending](#) on administrative costs, chaotic/absent regulation and standards, major political contributions to the GOP, and [poor outcomes for students](#).

Due to the overall lack of regulation of this new system, Ohio became known as the "[Wild West](#)" of charter schools — this was **not** a compliment. As a national charter *supporter* explained: "Ohio has a real quality control problem...Ohio's more broken than the Wild West."

Now, while these schools face less accountability and standards than public schools, they at least are required to go through public audits. Which is one reason one of these schools (ECOT — a for-profit,

online “school”) exploded into one of the worst scandals in Ohio history. ECOT’s student population grew to the size of a university, led to disastrous academic outcomes for those students, and millions of dollars were diverted to pay for “phantom students”—the school couldn’t even show attended their online classes.

So that is the second system of schools Ohio is now supporting. In 2022, the amount of public dollars sent to support this system reached \$1 billion.

But things get even worse...

System #3:

The next wave of the attack on Ohio’s once vaunted system of common schools has led to a **third** system of schools—private schools funded by now-universal vouchers.

This system of voucher-supported private schools has received \$5B since its inception. But with the elimination of any income and geographic restrictions in recent years, the spending has exploded of late—at almost \$1 billion in spending in the last year alone. This will no doubt eclipse the charter school system.

This third/voucher system involves two major directions:

First, most of the new spending is simply paying private school families to go to the same schools they’ve always gone to. (And for the most part, these are families in well-off suburbs who could already afford these schools).

[View picture [online](#)]

Second, to the extent there are a small percentage of voucher users moving from public schools to private schools, the data shows that they are using public dollars to go to **worse schools**.

A stunning 88% of the time families use vouchers to switch schools, those families send their children to schools with **worse** test scores than the public school they previously attended. And every year at that new private school, the average voucher user sees their score drop 12% PER YEAR versus performance back at their public school.

How could this be? Because the higher quality private schools (now receiving numerous vouchers for long-time students) are still too expensive for most families (the voucher doesn’t cover the high tuition of these schools). And that reality creates a financial incentive to open and operate pop-up, low-quality (often for-profit) schools—ones that the voucher alone can cover—which is where most of these kids end up. The vouchers are guaranteed revenue for businesses and organizations, but the schools they open are largely low-quality and wholly unregulated.

And one other factor adds to the problem: unlike even the charter schools, these voucher schools aren’t audited at all. Which means we have no idea how this entire system of schools is spending and will spend the billions they have received. All we know is that test scores are dropping when kids transfer over to them.

Finally, to show how serious the legislature is about standing up this third system of schools, for the first time, the statehouse recently began allocating capital funds to support building or renovating these private, voucher-receiving schools. That’s right — the state is now paying for both the construction and operation of these wholly unaudited and unaccountable private schools.

From One System to Three

So that’s the big picture: Ohio took one of the best performing systems of public education in America and turned it into THREE systems:

- 1) the \$1B “wild-west” **for-profit charter school system** (with poor outcomes and not enough accountability)
- 2) the \$1B and growing **universal voucher system** (with poor outcomes and no auditing whatsoever).
- 3) the **remaining (and original) public system**, which still educates the vast majority of Ohio students, and is being underfunded by close to \$1B.

So—even as the Constitution says the Ohio General Assembly should support “a” system of “common schools”—the state of Ohio now shoulders the task of overseeing, funding and administering **three** systems rather than one. It has direct control over the public one, some transparency over the charters, and absolutely no clue about what happens with the exploding voucher system.

And now we know that with both the voucher and charter systems, our \$1B of investment in each is generating poor outcomes. We are literally spending money to make things worse.

And we also know that due to all that money siphoned to these two failing and unaccountable systems, the **public system** is dramatically underfunded as well. Which of course also leads to struggles, as well as a higher burden on local property taxpayers because the state is underfunding public education in order to support the two failing systems.

[View picture [online](#)]

Add it all up and, no surprise, Ohio’s 5th ranked system of public education from not long ago has now plummeted into the mid-20s.

Because when you take one good system and break it into three broken systems, that’s what’s going to happen.

Why Does it Continue?

In any normal world or organization, the people who championed such a colossal failure would be fired. Results like this would spark an immediate change of direction, right?

But in a world with no accountability, where pay-to-play corruption is how you get ahead and serving public outcomes is no longer the goal, the architects of this disaster have actually been rewarded for the disaster.

That’s why Jon Husted, perhaps the most consistent architect of this catastrophe going back decades, has risen in spite of this abject failure. From statehouse member, to Speaker of the Ohio House, to State Senator, to Secretary of State, to now—the Lt. Gov. And he is the GOP darling to be the GOP’s Governor candidate.

[View Husted/ECOT pictures [online](#)]

Jon Husted receiving an honorary degree from ECOT — the scam school that bilked taxpayers while destroying the education of thousands of students; ECOT leaders explained that without Husted, ECOT would not have existed. They are correct!

In most of these positions, he played an instrumental role in creating both failed systems. But in the broken culture of Columbus, with the money they’ve siphoned off into these private systems, he’s actually been rewarded for all the damage he caused.

The only way we’ll end this is to clean up the corruption and pay-to-play culture in Ohio once and for all.

And we do that in part by showing that the greatest damage of Ohio’s corrupt culture is not our energy rates, or lost coins. It is the destruction of a system of public education that Ohioans have uniquely

CC3866 8.29.24 Thursday

enjoyed since almost the founding of our state, that anchored Ohio's growth and success for generations, and that was one of the nation's finest as recently as 2010.

They sold off all of that for some short-term political gain and dollars.

And if you're willing to sell education and Ohio's kids to the highest bidder, you'll sell anything.

Which they pretty much do.

Spread the word!! This is THE issue that could oust the GOP from power in Ohio.