

**ProPublica: In an unprecedented move, Ohio is funding the construction of private religious schools.**

A September 17 ProPublica [article](#) by Eli Hager reveals that Ohio public officials have opened the floodgates of taxpayer-funded private school facilities via the Capital Improvements Bill. Possibly some legislators didn't know those private school capital funds were in the bill.

The Cleveland voucher project started with a few million, about the same amount that is in the current Capital Improvements Bill for private school facility funding. If this capital improvements funding scheme is continued, Ohio taxpayers in the future may foot the bill for billions in private school construction.

Note in the article, the Senate President did not respond to ProPublica's requests for comment just like he didn't want to answer questions from the Plaintiffs in the EdChoice voucher litigation.

**In an Unprecedented Move, Ohio Is Funding the Construction of Private Religious Schools**

**The state is giving millions in taxpayer dollars directly to private schools to help them renovate and expand their campuses. It may be the next frontier in the push to increase the use of school vouchers, proponents say.**

by [Eli Hager](#) Sept. 17, 5 a.m. EDT

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The state of Ohio is giving taxpayer money to private, religious schools to help them build new buildings and expand their campuses, which is nearly unprecedented in modern U.S. history.

While [many states have recently enacted sweeping school voucher programs](#) that give parents taxpayer money to spend on private school tuition for their kids, Ohio has cut out the middleman. Under a bill passed by its Legislature this summer, the state is now providing millions of dollars in grants directly to religious schools, most of them Catholic, to renovate buildings, build classrooms, improve playgrounds and more.

The goal in providing the grants, according to the measure's chief architect, Matt Huffman, is to increase the capacity of private schools in part so that they can sooner absorb more voucher students.

"The capacity issue is the next big issue on the horizon" for voucher efforts, Huffman, the Ohio Senate president and a Republican, [told the Columbus Dispatch](#).

Huffman did not respond to ProPublica's requests for comment.

[Following Hurricane Katrina](#) and [the start of the COVID-19 pandemic](#), some federal taxpayer dollars went toward repairing and improving private K-12 schools in multiple states. Churches that operate schools often receive government funding for the social services that they offer; some orthodox Jewish schools in New York have relied on significant financial support from the city, [The New York Times has found](#).

But national experts on education funding emphasized that what Ohio is doing is categorically different.

"This is new, dangerous ground, funding new voucher schools," said Josh Cowen, a senior fellow at the Education Law Center and [the author of a new book](#) on the history of billionaire-led voucher efforts. For decades, churches have relied on conservative philanthropy to be able to build their schools, Cowen said, or they've held fundraising drives or asked their diocese for help.

They've never, until now, been able to build schools expressly on the public dime.

“This breaks through the myth,” said David Pepper, a political writer and the former chairman of the Ohio Democratic Party. Pepper said that courts have long given voucher programs a pass, ruling that they don’t violate the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state because a publicly funded voucher technically passes through the conduit of a parent on the way to a religious school.

With this latest move, though, Ohio is funding the construction of a separate, religious system of education, Pepper said, adding that if no one takes notice, “This will happen in other states — they all learn from each other like laboratories.”

The Ohio Constitution says that the General Assembly “will secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools throughout the state; but no religious or other sect, or sects, shall ever have any exclusive right to, or control of, any part of the school funds of this state.”

Yet Troy McIntosh, executive director of the Ohio Christian Education Network — several of whose schools received the new grants — recently told [the Lima News](#) that part of the reason for spending these public dollars on the expansion of private schools is that “we want to make sure that from our perspective, Christian school options are available to any kid who chooses that in the state.”

When they were implemented in the 1990s, vouchers in Ohio, like in many places, were limited in scope; they were available only to parents whose children were attending (often underfunded) public schools in Cleveland. The idea was to give those families money that they could then spend on tuition at a hopefully better private school, thus empowering them with what was called school choice.

Over the decades, the state incrementally expanded voucher programs to a wider and wider range of applicants. And last year, legislators and Gov. Mike DeWine extended the most prominent of those programs, called EdChoice, to all Ohio families.

It was the ultimate victory for Ohio’s school-choice advocates. The problem, though, was that in many parts of Ohio and other states, especially rural areas, parents can’t spend this new voucher money because private schools are either too far away or already at capacity.

This, in turn, has become a [major political liability for voucher advocates in many states](#), with rural conservatives becoming increasingly indignant that their tax dollars are being spent on vouchers for upper-middle-class families in far-off metropolitan areas where there are more private schools.

In April, the Buckeye Institute, an Ohio-based conservative think tank affiliated with the Koch brothers’ political advocacy group Americans for Prosperity, recognized the problem. [In a policy memo](#), the institute said that it was offering lawmakers “additional solutions to address the growing need for classroom space” in private and charter schools, “given the success of the Ohio EdChoice program.” Among its recommendations: draw funding from the Ohio One-Time Strategic Community Investment Fund, which provides grants of state money for the construction and repair of buildings, as well as other “capital projects.”

Within months, the Legislature did precisely that. Led by Huffman, Republicans slipped at least \$4 million in grants to private schools into a larger budget bill. There was little debate, in part because budget bills across the country have become too large to deliberate over every detail and, also, Republicans have supermajorities in both chambers in Ohio.

According to an Ohio Legislative Service Commission report, the grants, some of them over a million dollars, then went out to various Catholic schools around the state. ProPublica contacted administrators at each of these schools to ask what they will be using their new taxpayer money on, but they either didn’t answer or said that they didn’t immediately know. (One of the many differences between public and private schools is that the latter do not have to answer questions from the public about their budgets, even if they’re now publicly funded.)

The total grant amount of roughly \$4 million this year may seem small, said William L. Phillis, executive director of the Ohio Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding. But, he noted, Ohio's voucher program itself started out very small three decades ago, and today it's [a billion-dollar system](#).

"They get their foot in the door with a few million dollars in infrastructure funding," Phillis said. "It sets a precedent, and eventually hundreds of millions will be going to private school construction."

[Mollie Simon](#) contributed research.

[Ohio Will Use Taxpayer Money to Construct Private Religious Schools — ProPublica](#)