

Robert Moore, in a December commentary published by the [Capital Journal](#), ponders the efficacy of vouchers (or lack thereof).

The voucher experiment, as established and promoted in Ohio, has not accomplished the promise made by voucher advocates and is an alarming financial drain on the public common school system. Robert Moore concludes, “are we getting any value from the hundreds of millions of dollars we are pouring into private schools with our taxes? If we are, I would like to see evidence of it.”

Is Ohio’s school voucher experiment panning out?

[Rob Moore](#)

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On Nov. 5, voters in three states — Colorado, Kentucky, and Nebraska — [rejected state private school voucher programs](#).

Private school vouchers are a program where a family can take public dollars to spend on private school tuition. Arguments in favor of a system like this have been made since the 1950s, when famous libertarian economist [Milton Friedman argued](#) that allowing school vouchers would improve educational outcomes for children by increasing parental choice, promoting competition among schools, and reducing government inefficiencies.

Friedman’s arguments came under fire in the decades hence, not the least of which in the public policy classic [Exit, Voice, and Loyalty](#), where German Economist Albert Hirschman argues that Friedman overlooks an important mechanism available to parents in struggling schools: their ability to voice their concerns through the democratic process.

Policymakers in Ohio have largely embraced private school vouchers. Last year, the [Ohio General Assembly expanded eligibility for private school vouchers](#) to all families in the state, regardless of income. According to reporting from the Ohio Newsroom, this led to a quadrupling of use of private school vouchers, while enrollment in private schools has been steady.

From Fiscal Year 2023 to Fiscal Year 2024, voucher use increased by 60,000 students while enrollment in private schools increased by only 3,000 students. This means 95% of new voucher use in 2024 was by students who were already enrolled in private schools or would have enrolled in private schools anyways.

This means the policy change in Ohio to expand eligibility was largely a windfall to families that were already planning on sending children to private schools. And because of the policy change that was made, it was likely a regressive windfall that accrued mainly to well-off households. The [most recent estimate](#) of the size of total spending on private school vouchers in 2024 is about \$970 million. For context, that is [more than the state spent](#) on the entire Department of Children and Youth (which runs state child welfare, child care, and early education programs) and the Department of Natural Resources combined.

What are we getting for these investments? Last year, when this expansion was being considered, my firm [asked 23 Ohio economists](#) what expanding Ohio’s school choice voucher program would do for the state economy. They were tepid about the potential change. Only six thought the expansion would increase test scores, only three thought it would decrease poverty, while 11 believed it would lower the quality of public schools.

Certainly there are arguments for limited use of school vouchers. I think especially of innovative education models or schools that are focused on technical education, schools with workplace tie-ins and trade schools. Having innovative options for families that want a niche offering could help them learn and could create new learning opportunities for students that did not exist before.

That being said, it seems like the experiment of school vouchers in Ohio may have swung a bit far. Are we getting any value from the hundreds of millions of dollars we are pouring into private schools with our taxes? If we are, I would like to see evidence of it. Because we certainly wring our hands much more about programs that cost much less.

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