

## January 27 Ohio Capital Journal: Ohio GOP backtracks on cutting public school funding.

Morgan Trau's [article](#) suggests that the newly-minted House Speaker is getting pushback on his pronouncement that the state's current school funding plan is "unsustainable". The article quotes Dan Heintz (Cleveland Heights-University Heights board member, Chardon Local teacher, and Coalition/VHO Steering Committee member) extensively, as well as other school district leaders.

The extensive pushback on the Speaker's outrageous pronouncements must have caused considerable angst within the Speaker's caucus.

### Ohio GOP backtracks on cutting public school funding

By: [Morgan Trau](#) - January 27, 2025 4:40 am

Ohio Republican leadership has backtracked on their steadfast effort to cut funding for public education.

Our extensive reporting led to massive backlash for lawmakers, and numerous GOP members spoke out privately.

### Recap — history

Ohio's history with school funding isn't the brightest. The Ohio Supreme Court ruled in 1997 in *DeRolph v. State* that the way the state funds schools is unconstitutional, relying too much on property taxes.

Throughout the next three decades, lawmakers went back and forth on policy in an attempt to fix the unconstitutionality. The Ohio Education Association, as well as lawmakers on each side of the aisle, have deemed that it has been unconstitutional since then. However, some Republicans argue that because they are no longer using the struck-down policy, and since nothing else has been deemed "unconstitutional" in court, they argue that, by definition, it can't be considered unconstitutional.

Either way, there has been a bipartisan effort for years to fix the funding system.

House Bill 1, introduced by State Reps. Bride Rose Sweeney (D-Cleveland) and Jamie Callender (R-Concord), in 2021, required \$333 million additional dollars a year for K-12 education funding — or about \$2 billion overall. It is called the Cupp-Patterson Fair School Funding Plan (FSFP).

Their bill was an amended version of policy that passed the House but not the Senate in the General Assembly prior, which was created by former Speaker Bob Cupp (R-Lima) and former state Rep. John Patterson (D-Jefferson). House Bill 1 was finally passed in the budget and signed into law.

The rollout was supposed to take six years and is meant to change how public dollars are provided to K-12 schools. It would give additional support to local districts so they can rely less on property taxes.

The first two years were partially fully funded, the second two years were fully funded, and there are just two years left to go.

### Recap — timeline

In early January, comments made by new House Speaker Matt Huffman (R-Lima) angered viewers, readers, parents and education leaders across the state.

"I don't think there is a third phase to Cupp-Patterson," Huffman told reporters. "As to the expectation that those things are gonna go in... I guess the clear statement I can say is I think those increases in spending are unsustainable."

The G.A. from four years ago shouldn't be able to "bind" what the future lawmakers can do, he said.

We did a follow-up story several days later, in which half a dozen GOP legislators personally reached out, vowing to protect K-12 education.

Those six, and at least 15 others we have spoken to in recent weeks, say that one of their main priorities is supporting public schools.

This comes as Gov. Mike DeWine would not commit to supporting the current bipartisan funding formula, saying that “difficult choices” will need to be made.

A week after that, we brought the topic back up to Huffman due to the immense backlash. He doubled down.

“If people are upset about it, they still need to address the facts,” the speaker said. “I think the current system, especially if we did the third part of what some people are calling the plan, is really unsustainable.”

He called the continuation of the current funding plan a “fantasy.”

### **A change on the horizon**

Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District gets roughly 75% of its funding from local taxes, with the rest coming from the state’s FSFP.

But Board of Education member Dan Heintz said his district, and all of K-12 schools, would suffer under Huffman’s plan.

“We’re looking at reduced programs, we’re looking at larger classrooms, we’re looking at less one-on-one and small group work with our students,” Heintz said.

Huffman has been adamant about slashing at least \$650 million in public education spending in this General Assembly’s budget.

“The implementing of the Cupp-Patterson plan that many believers say — *fait accompli* — that we decided four years ago, that in this budget we’re going to do that, in my estimation, is a fantasy,” the speaker said on Jan. 14.

Huffman explained that this year’s budget is going to have significantly less money due to the federal COVID dollars drying up. And for him, public education is on the chopping block.

Ohioans have called their lawmakers. Former Speaker Jason Stephens (R-Kitts Hill), Callender and a dozen more Republicans reached out to share they would fight for school funding. And it seems they have.

This week, Huffman seemed to backtrack from his firm stance.

“School funding is a longer discussion that I think really cannot be had in earnest and detail until the governor introduces the budget,” Huffman said on Jan. 22.

### **So what happened?**

The Republicans went on a caucus retreat at the beginning of the G.A. During the private three-day-long trip, policy was discussed.

I’ve confirmed with half a dozen representatives that the speaker’s team gave a presentation about how the current funding formula needs to be cut due to it being “unsustainable.” After the supporters spoke, numerous Republicans stood up to advocate for fully funding public schools, starting a larger discussion.

Some of the lawmakers have been focused on public schools for years. Others haven’t always been the most vocal supporters but still wanted to speak up, while others are education leaders in the state.

“I don’t think we landed, because it’s so enormous, on anything in particular,” Huffman said.

Huffman mentioned how his colleagues expressed frustration with real estate taxes.

“Seventy percent or 75% — the number I found was actually 63% on average — are the real estate taxes that go to your local government,” the leader continued. “No matter what happens, the taxes go up — and so we have to address that and therefore address school funding.”

Although what Huffman said may technically be true, since schools fall under local government, real estate taxes mainly go to education — not township officers or child services.

For example, we searched Huffman’s address in Lima and found that more than 70% of his real estate taxes in 2023 went to the school system, while less than 10% went to the village/corporation.

### **Affordability**

Parma City Schools Superintendent Charles Smialek is still worried about Huffman’s championing of the private school vouchers. Under Huffman’s watch, the state spent roughly [\\$1 billion](#) in public money to send kids to nonpublic schools.

“If we’re gonna squeeze our public schools, what is the commensurate squeeze on the other side?” he asked.

Huffman and many GOP politicians believe spending that much on EdChoice is necessary in order to have the money “follow the child” or have the students avoid poor-performing public schools.

“This program is designed to acknowledge the unique abilities and needs of Ohio’s student population and to foster an educational environment in which every student can have access to the best learning environment for them,” state Rep. Riordan McClain (R-Upper Sandusky) said in his testimony for one of his bills supporting vouchers.

A parent shouldn’t be forced to choose between moving to another school district for their child to go to a different school, he said.

“Ohio has made strides with the EdChoice Scholarship to provide new opportunities for financially challenged families as well as students in ‘failing’ districts,” he added.

If you can afford to pay out of pocket for education or you make a lower amount of income and are eligible for an EdChoice scholarship, you are able to have “educational options,” the lawmaker said.

The number of students receiving EdChoice Expansion vouchers increased from 23,272 students during the 2022-2023 school year to 82,946 students during the 2023-2024 school year, according to data provided by the [Ohio Department of Education & Workforce \(ODEW\)](#).

But the number of students enrolled in private schools during the 2023-24 school year only increased by 3,719 students, according to ODEW.

“What is the least expensive, acceptable educational product for the taxpayer?” Huffman asked rhetorically. “If someone says they’re willing to take a \$7,000 scholarship voucher and go to a private school rather than going to the school that... on average in the state, it’s about \$15,000 — that’s better for the taxpayers.”

Huffman is referencing the average operating expenditures per pupil, according to the Legislative Service Commission.

Many schools, like CH-UHCSD, reached out to share that their pupil numbers are much lower than that. They amount they receive is roughly \$2,300.

“The state of Ohio will send about three times that, \$8,400 to educate the same student at a private school,” Heintz said.

But for public schools, the EdChoice program is siphoning money from them, and the voucher system doesn't have a record to show for transparency.

"You would think with the \$1 billion in public investment, we'd be very concerned about what exactly that's going to," Smialek said. "And yet we don't have any type of report that can generate that type of information for us."

Public schools are held to higher standards than private schools, Smialek said.

We questioned Huffman on the lack of transparency with that state money, in which he said schools with voucher programs already have accountability because "lots of folks" send their kids to private schools.

Heintz is furious at Huffman. He is also more than just a school board member. He teaches American history at Chardon High School — and is part of the steering committee for Vouchers Hurt Ohio, the organizing suing the state for the private school voucher system.

Exactly 200 public school districts are part of the organization, according to the website. More than 130 are a part of the lawsuit. This includes Lima City School District, where Huffman is from.

"Here we have a man who five years ago voted in support of the fair school funding program and promised the future full implementation of the fair school funding program... Now he switches to the House and seems to have put on a different brain because he's all of a sudden saying 'the fair school funding program is unsustainable,'" Heintz said. "I say back, 'Mr. Huffman is not sustainable.'"

The speaker has remarked that even back when he voted on the FSFP, he didn't believe that it could require him to support it years later.

"That's often how a lot of projects go — early on it doesn't cost very [much] money — but some other governor or General Assembly will have to figure out how to pay for it," Huffman said in early Jan. "As it turns out, I am the other General Assembly years in the future, or possibly am, and I don't think the spending is sustainable."

### **What's next**

Just because Huffman isn't as resolute about public school spending doesn't mean that funding is safe, but Smialek said it's a step in the right direction.

"His caucus is giving some pushback here and really putting a little bit of a speed bump in terms of some of the initial conversations," Smialek said.

Huffman referenced the governor's budget. Although lawmakers are the ones who get to pick and choose what to do with the state's funding, Gov. Mike DeWine gets a say, too. His budget comes out first, then goes to the House for review and later to the Senate.

We asked DeWine in early January if he would fully fund public schools, but he was noncommittal.

"It would be unfair of me at this point to come out here and say we need to do this, this, this and this," the governor responded.

Former Lt. Gov. Jon Husted, now a U.S. Senator, jumped in, giving a more straightforward answer.

"Funding for the education of children will continue to be a huge budget priority going forward... as he's made sure of in the past," Husted said.

Still, there is a coalition of House Republicans that would be able to get the FSFP into the budget or prevent a budget from passing that doesn't have it.

Callender is one of the most vocal GOP supporters of all schools.

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"I have fought since my first term, when the DeRolph decision came out, for public education at our local district schools and will continue that fight as long as the voters give me the chance to," Callender said.

Only 16 out of 65 House Republicans need to join the Democrats to block a cut to funding.

"If taxpayers and community members turn up the heat on their local legislators, that heat will be felt in Columbus," Heintz said.

It clearly already has.

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