

## **Former legislator and current Akron school board member: Vouchers are starving our public schools.**

Akron Board of Education member and former legislator, Barbara Sykes emphasizes the harm the state's EdChoice voucher scheme heaps on the public school system in a Guest Column in the [Akron Beacon Journal](#).

In her opinion column, board member Sykes laments the lack of full funding of the Cupp/Patterson Fair School Funding plan.

### **Akron school board member: Vouchers are starving our public schools | Opinion**

Barbara Sykes Member, Akron Board of Education

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#### Key Points

- Akron schools are being hindered because funding that could've gone to them is used to pay for Ohio's voucher program, writes school board member Barbara Sykes.
- The expanded vouchers program comes with drawbacks, including admission limits and placing a strain on public school budgets.
- Akron Public Schools is challenging the constitutionality of the state voucher program.

Akron Public Schools (APS) are not failing – our schools are being starved by Ohio's EdChoice voucher program.

Our scholars are making significant progress particularly in early learning, College & Career Readiness Academics and reducing the achievement gap. We have a dedicated team of administrators, talented teachers, staff and board members who are focused on student achievement. Our community has a long-standing financial commitment by voting for levies to support our schools.

However, traditional public schools across Ohio, including APS, are being starved of funding and resources diverted to pay for Ohio's voucher programs.

I vividly remember Gov. George Voinovich, the former Cleveland mayor, and late Cleveland Councilwoman Fannie Lewis promoting vouchers as a solution to help poor children escape struggling public schools. Councilwoman Lewis wanted the best academic opportunities for her grandchildren and all children. She said to anyone who would listen that vouchers would help remove children from failing schools, and the competition from voucher schools would encourage traditional public schools to improve.

That has not happened. How could it? Traditional public schools have never been adequately funded.

The current Cupp/Patterson Fair School Funding Plan, which was meant to consider the cost of educating a child and the community's ability to pay its share of those costs, has not been fully implemented. Instead, funds available for traditional public schools are being allocated to finance Ohio's EdChoice voucher program.

As of the 2023-24 school year, the state adopted a universal EdChoice voucher system, allowing nearly every family, regardless of income, to qualify for at least a partial voucher scholarship. A family of four with an income of up to \$140,000 is eligible for a full voucher for each school-age child in the family.

There is no cap on income in the universal voucher plan in Ohio. That means that all families, regardless of income, are eligible for some voucher amount.

APS has seen a significant increase in the number of non-low-income families using vouchers, per the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce.

But competition between traditional public schools and private voucher schools is not an even playing field. There are not enough voucher schools to enroll the vast number of our school-age students.

APS is required to and will happily accept any family who knocks on our doors, regardless of their income, social status, disabilities or academic assessment. Voucher schools typically establish admission requirements to accept only students who fit their unique mission, goals and framework. The vast majority of our 20,000 public-school children's only choice is APS.

Voucher schools are also not held to the same level of accountability and transparency as traditional public schools.

Additionally, APS is legally required to bear the expense of busing charter and non-public students, even outside of county lines. Diverting public dollars to private schools is placing significant strain on APS' budget.

A total of 3,777 students who live in the APS district participate in the state's voucher programs at a cost of about \$29 million. Almost 3,400 of these students participate in the universal EdChoice voucher program at a cost of about \$21 million.

The state's payments for voucher students is the primary reason that the Cupp/Patterson Fair School Funding Plan has not been fully implemented. Had the state's school funding formula been fully realized, APS would have gotten an additional \$12 million from the state this year. APS has joined the Vouchers Hurt Ohio Coalition. This coalition of public school districts is challenging the constitutionality of the voucher program diverting state funds that could be used to adequately fund our traditional public schools. We will have a court trial date later this year.

Fighting for adequate funding will at least give public-school students an opportunity to succeed. The achievement gap between Akron schools and non-low-income school districts is real. The test scores, unfortunately, continue to prove it.

*Barbara A. Sykes is a member of the Akron Board of Education. She previously served as a member of the Ohio House of Representatives and on Akron City Council*