

The Columbus Dispatch coverage of the August 20 Hilliard “education” forum.

The Hilliard Forum featured a panel discussion on “education” in which politicians and like-minded activists participated on the panel. Conspicuously, absent were teachers on the panel. The event turned out to be a rally event for school privatization in which public school bashing was prevalent. Some of the panelists had no clue as to the realities of education, particularly public education. Panelists’ quotes in the Dispatch seemed to reflect a lack of understanding of state responsibility for education. One particular statement by a school privatization zealot—“...school choice is the greatest educational reform tool we currently have on the table”—is an example of the tone of the “information” presented. The discussion seemed to be robust on politics and nonviable on education.

Gubernatorial candidate Vivek Ramaswamy says he wants to push education standards in Ohio

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Ohio Republican gubernatorial candidate Vivek Ramaswamy outlined his position on the future of education during a forum in Hilliard, saying that the state needed to bring standards back into schools.

Ramaswamy was the keynote speaker on Aug. 20 at a panel discussion featuring Republican lawmakers, school choice advocates and others at the Makoy Center in Hilliard.

Outside, several dozen protesters lined the road leading up to the event center and said that the panel members inside represented a right-wing Republican threat to public education.

During his address, Ramaswamy said that bringing standards back to Ohio's education system would improve students' outcomes, arguing that the nation's education system was falling behind countries like China.

"We are going to bring a radical revolution of standards to our public schools — I would tell you that we're going to elevate our standards — but that may be too much, we're going to bring standards in the first place," Ramaswamy said.

Ramaswamy said the state would focus on improving the standards for both reading and math in the state. He said he would "bring back the third-grade reading guarantee," a program focused on [reading that the state already uses](#). Students who don't achieve a base score on a state test may be retained in the third grade, although during the 2023-2024 school year parents gained the option to exempt their students.

He also said he would push a phonics-based reading education called the "science of reading." The Ohio General Assembly already [mandated that districts implement science of reading in their curriculum](#) after Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, also a Republican, promoted the literacy method.

"It is our moral responsibility to make sure that you are able to read at any basic level before you advance to the fourth grade," Ramaswamy said.

Ramaswamy also said that he wants to ensure that more students are proficient in math, particularly eighth-grade algebra. Right now, he said, Ohio "is completely missing that mark." The Dispatch previously reported that [more than 60% of students in the state are not proficient](#) in eighth-grade algebra.

"We are entering the era of AI, we're entering the era of quantum computing," Ramaswamy said. "It would be a moral dereliction if we allow our kids to grow up in that country, that world, to be victimized by the future instead of being empowered to seize that future."

Ramaswamy also said that the issues around public education have "devolved into an accounting debate" where people debate about whether more or less funding will help public schools.

"Now I'm not going to say that if you lower funding that automatically means outcomes are going to improve, but it means that there are other factors far more responsible for whether students perform far more than this silly accounting debate," Ramaswamy said.

Ramaswamy also said that base teacher pay should be increased and that teacher salaries should be merit-based and determined by the district administration, not through collective bargaining agreements with unions. Under Ohio law, the base pay for a teacher with a bachelor's degree is \$35,000. Last year, a House Democrat introduced a [bill to raise base teacher salary](#) to \$50,000, but the bill did not advance past committee.

"This is not a Republican talking point, but I am going to say it anyway because it is true," Ramaswamy said. "The best public school teachers deserve to be paid a lot more than the starting salary of \$40,000. In a modern economy, you can't live the American dream on that."

Panelists talk education issues, push school choice

During the panel, the participants discussed a variety of issues, including school choice, transportation, to property taxes to public school performance.

The Republican supermajority that has controlled the Ohio General Assembly for years has steadily expanded school choice, [extending the state's voucher program](#) to qualify most Ohio families. In the two-year budget signed by DeWine in July, the state allocates about \$120 million more for public schools each of the next two years, although Democrats, school officials and union administrators say the sum is still far short of what children and teachers need and some districts [are expected to lose funding](#).

Omar Tarazi, [attorney for South Western City Schools](#) and former Republican member of Hilliard City Council, said that while the "rest of the world is working really hard to compete at a global level," the United States' public education systems are "fighting about the stupidest things."

"Microaggression training, whether there's enough safe space signs on the wall and all the silliness, and we're not having that long-term vision," Tarazi said.

In May, The Dispatch reported that South Western City Schools board members [voted to join a school board organization headed by conservatives](#) that advocates for English-only education, separate classes for students with learning disabilities, and combating "divisive identity politics."

Troy McIntosh, executive director of the Ohio Christian Education Network, said that the state of school choice in Ohio is "very strong."

"On the whole, school choice is very strong in Ohio, and the reason I think that has become the case is that school choice is the greatest educational reform tool we currently have on the table," McIntosh said. "We're at a crisis point in and school choice addresses the source of that problem."

Protesters say Ramaswamy is a threat to public education

Marielle Henault, with Pint Size Protestors and the Columbus Education Justice Coalition, was among those protesting outside the event. She said the protesters were fighting for the future of public education in Ohio.

"It has been systematically under attack, our public schools have been underfunded for decades at this point," Henault said. "Meanwhile, money is being funneled through the voucher program to private and charter schools, which is taking away the money that we need to educate every single child in Ohio."

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Henault said that she is concerned that if Ramaswamy is elected, his actions will mirror actions at the federal level, such as cutting funding and dismantling the U.S. Education Department.

"I imagine that will get worse," Henault said. "There are lots of concerns."

Cole Behrens covers K-12 education and school districts in central Ohio. Have a tip? Contact Cole at cbehrens@dispatch.com or connect with him on X at [@Colebehr_report](https://twitter.com/Colebehr_report)