

## **Akron School district hosted a meeting on school vouchers and school funding**

Attached is a news report on the April 21st Akron meeting that features the state's decrepit school funding plan and the private school voucher scam.

The Akron meeting is the kind of public forums that school districts throughout the state should be conducting to highlight that the General Assembly is required by the Constitution to fund a thorough and efficient system of common schools and that the voucher scheme is unconstitutional.

### **Akron-area school leaders warn school vouchers are draining public education funding**

Approximately 3,400 students living in Akron utilized EdChoice vouchers to attend non-public schools during the 2024-25 school year, according to the most recent state report card.

by **Carissa Woytach**

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Leaders from public school districts in [Summit County](#) on Tuesday evening shared a clear message with the public: The state's commitment to their students is broken — funding policies that direct public dollars to charter and private schools.

“The reality of Ohio's education system is we are funding multiple, parallel education systems which are inequitable, unbalanced and unfair,” said Pat Shipe, the president of the Akron Education Association, the labor union that represents more than 2,000 teachers and staff in [Akron Public Schools](#).

“The state legislature has created a deeply inequitable education system in Ohio where public schools are expected to serve every child, [with] the most stringent rules, while for-profit [systems] receive your public tax dollars with far less or even no accountability for those,” Shipe said.

Tuesday marked the first time in recent years the county's education leaders came together in a public setting to address these shared concerns.

Shipe was joined on a panel at Firestone Community Learning Center by Akron Public Schools Superintendent Mary Outley, Tallmadge City Schools Superintendent Steve Wood, Akron Board of Education President Barbara Sykes and Akron Mayor Shammass Malik, all of whom defended the importance of public education. The panel discussion was moderated by Scarlett Boudier, president of Advocacy & Communication Solutions.

Other school districts in attendance included Stow-Monroe Falls and Cuyahoga Falls in Summit County. Representatives from Canton City Schools in Stark County and the labor union representing Toledo Public Schools' teachers (Lucas County) also attended.

### **School funding an 'unfair system'**

Public school districts are facing similar challenges. In Akron schools, leaders are in the midst of cutting \$11 million from the upcoming school year's budget, with plans to cut another \$27 million the year after that to keep the district's finances in the black.

In Tallmadge City Schools, Wood's district is in the midst of a [property tax levy](#) campaign. Like Akron Public Schools, Tallmadge faces a budget deficit in the next several years, according to its financial forecast.

Meanwhile, a grassroots effort across the state is collecting signatures for a ballot referendum to eliminate all property taxes — without providing another way to fund public schools, libraries and other public entities.

Fully implementing the [Fair School Funding Plan](#) would be a more equitable way to fund public schools, Wood said. Beyond that, it will take playing offense instead of defense.

“Right now, with the way the local funding is, it puts education as a lightning rod for the anti-tax, anti-government folks,” he said after Tuesday's panel.

“Therefore, a lot of people aren't necessarily voting against schools; they're voting against taxes, and unfortunately that's the battleground we find ourselves in with education. ... We need to prioritize education so it's not right in the middle of that.”

Panelists agreed that Ohio's longstanding overreliance on local property taxes to fund districts remains inequitable and unfair. Malik, the Akron mayor, referenced a report he read from 1925 that argued the state's use of property taxes to fund schools was unsustainable.

“It has been illegal, our funding formula, for most of my life,” Malik, a 2009 graduate of Firestone High School, said. “We have to do better.”

In 1997, the Ohio Supreme Court ruled the overreliance on property taxes in school funding was unconstitutional — setting off three decades of debate and legislation in the Statehouse to change Ohio's funding formula.

In 2021, legislators passed the bipartisan [Fair School Funding Plan](#), which based the amount the state gave each district on the actual costs for educating students and a local community's ability to share those costs. The change went into effect in fiscal year 2022, but state legislators have since moved away from fully funding the model and have not updated the mechanisms for providing local funding since it was first introduced.

“So we will be looking at how the elections go ... when people get into office, what adjustments are they going to make?” Outley said, referencing Ohio's 2026 governor's race.

“And that will let us know, ‘Do we have to stay the course with looking at reducing \$27 million from our budget, or will we see some relief because they're going to go with some type of fair school funding approach?’”

### **As Ohio school voucher use grows, so do public schools' costs**

While public districts receive funding based on outdated formulas, panelists said they are also required to provide services to students who never step foot in their buildings.

In Akron, the school district spent more than \$19 million on transportation last year, Outley said — \$8 million more than it received in transportation funds from the state.

Why? It is required to provide transportation to children throughout Akron, not just those attending Akron Public Schools.

Akron schools and other public school districts are mandated to work their schedules around the needs of non-public schools, Outley said, or incur fines for dropping those students off too early or too late.

Those requirements come as EdChoice voucher expansion allows additional families to utilize state dollars to cover the cost of sending their children to private or religious schools. Last year, the state's voucher program was [ruled unconstitutional](#) by a Franklin County Common Pleas judge. The state has appealed the decision.

About 3,400 students living in Akron utilized EdChoice vouchers to attend nonpublic schools during the 2024-25 school year, according to the most recent state report card. About a decade earlier, the state report cards stated about 1,200 students used EdChoice vouchers in Akron.

Sykes, the president of Akron's public school board, remembered when vouchers first arrived in Cleveland — then-City Council member Fannie Lewis pushed for school vouchers to give low-income students opportunities outside the metropolitan district.

At the time, Sykes said, public schools were “trying to walk on the bridge and build it at the same time,” and the idea of letting some students attend private or religious schools using vouchers was not meant to destroy their public counterparts.

“Now we are giving vouchers to everyone just because we can — that was not the plan,” Sykes said.

### **Akron's public school facilities could be at risk due to enrollment**

Panelists briefly discussed [Ohio Senate Bill 311](#). If passed, it would allow the state to close public school buildings that are under 60% capacity and offer to sell or lease them to nonpublic or charter schools.

The bulk of Akron Public Schools' buildings are community learning centers — meaning a portion of their construction costs were paid for through a quarter-percent, 30-year income tax first passed in 2003.

It was a commitment voters made over decades to support the district, Malik said. “It was a decision we made as a community but it was needed, it was necessary,” he added.

Outley decried the idea that the state could shutter a building based on an arbitrary enrollment number that may not capture everything that is happening in the space.

“Public school buildings were funded by taxpayers and belong to the community,” Outley said, “not to the state to redistribute.”

As proposed, the bill only carves out career technical programs. It does not include provisions for specialty programs such as special education units, which have fewer students in a classroom.

The proposal remains in the state Senate Education Committee.

Moving forward, panelists called for advocacy on public schools' behalf and for voters to learn where local and state candidates stand on issues impacting area school districts.

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“We’re not begging — we want our tax dollars to go toward the public school system,” Sykes said. “Property taxes are worth the value of our children who we are constantly looking [to] carry not only our school system, our city, our county, our state, our country, our world. They deserve everything — and then some — that we can give to them.”