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Mike Curtin's July 23, 2026, speech to the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, Voices in Leadership Summit is a compelling statement about the state's responsibility to secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools.

Mike Curtin is a professional journalist who worked for 4 decades with the Columbus Dispatch. His last position at the Dispatch was assistant publisher.

Mike Curtin served as a State Representative for 8 years. He served on the Constitutional Modernization Commission. He is a historian. He is an extremely influential advocate of the public common school.

His July 23 speech provides an important message to Ohioans.

Martha Holden Jennings Foundation

Voices in Leadership Summit – July 23, 2026, 10 a.m. – Cleveland Marriott East, Warrensville Heights, Oh

Q: You have watched Ohio's political relationship with public education shift over decades. What is the headline right now for the superintendents in this room?

A: Ohio in historic retreat from supporting public schools

Q: That's a bold headline. What's the story to justify it?

A: Yes, it is bold. The word "historic" was not chosen lightly. The education clause of the Ohio Constitution – Article VI, Section 2 – is historic. *It is the only section* of our state constitution that explicitly mandates the General Assembly to finance a public service throughout the state. Article VI, Section 2 – mandating "a thorough and efficient system of common schools throughout the state" – is the *pre-eminent* public service obligation of the state. Within the 67,000 words of our state constitution, nothing else compares to the strength of that mandate. The delegates to our state's 1850-1851 constitutional convention knew what they were doing. They made the education clause the strongest part of the constitution because they understood, as the Founders taught, that an educated citizenry would be essential to preserving our democratic republic. In 1853, two years after Ohio voters adopted the new constitution, the General Assembly passed legislation to follow this historic mandate. That legislation imposed a 2-mill statewide property tax for schools and mandated that **all** school funds (QUOTE) "be applied exclusively to the support of public and common schools." CLOSE QUOTE. And for the next 112 years, from 1853 to 1965, that's exactly what the General Assembly did. It honored the constitutional mandate despite periodic proposals to funnel public funds to private schools. After 112 years of fidelity to the mandate, the first departure from it took place in 1965, when Gov. James A. Rhodes signed the so-called "Fair Bus Bill," requiring school districts to transport nonpublic school students living more than two miles from their schools. We all know what followed – a steady expansion of allocating public funds for private education. Last year, the 2024-25 school year, vouchers supported 631 of Ohio's 714 chartered, nonpublic schools (88%). For the second year in a row, the state is allocating over one billion dollars for private schools (LSC), making Ohio's voucher program one of the nation's largest. Because the program now is nearly universal, making practically all K-12 students eligible regardless of family income, the steep, upward trajectory of support for private schools continues. Now, for the second budget in a row, the state is allocating millions of dollars to *build and renovate* private schools. These allocations are *historic*. They represent *historic* departures from the clear intent of the delegates to our 1850-1851 constitutional convention, and the words they crafted in Article VI, Section 2.

Q: What are the underlying causes, the reasons, the political calculus behind this "historic retreat."

A: Before we say more about vouchers, we must address two tectonic shifts that have taken place over the last two decades in Ohio's tax structure – shifts that have undermined the state's commitment to public schools.

Tectonic Shift No. 1 has been a continuous drive at the Statehouse to reduce the individual income tax with a stated goal by many lawmakers to eliminate it entirely. Since 2005, the General Assembly has passed eight reductions in the state income tax. The Ohio Legislative Budget Office calculates the cumulative revenue loss to the state has been about $100 billion dollars.

That was before the most recent reduction – the implementation of a flat tax of 2.75% for all Ohio income taxpayers which took effect Jan. 1 of this year. The Legislative Budget Office calculates this latest reduction will reduce state revenue by $529 million in fiscal 2026 and by more than $1.1 billion in fiscal 2027. Legislation now pending in the General Assembly would eliminate the state income tax altogether. That legislation is endorsed by one of the two major-party candidates for governor. Eliminating the state income tax would reduce state revenues by more than $10 billion dollars annually.

Tectonic Shift No. 2 has been a concurrent shift in Ohio's property tax burden from business and utility property to residential and agricultural property. Beginning in 2005, over four years the state phased out the tangible personal property tax on businesses, which before the phaseout generated one-fifth of Ohio's school property tax revenue. There also was a major reduction in utility personal property taxes.

Let's look at **SLIDE #1**.

This chart shows how dramatic the shift has been. From 1975 until the late 1990s, business property taxes accounted for just over half of property tax collections for schools. But since the late '90s, the reductions and eliminations just mentioned have resulted in a situation where businesses now pay less than one-third of school taxes, requiring owners of residential and agricultural property to shoulder more than two-thirds of the burden.

Let's look at **SLIDE #2**.

These two pie charts use the same data used in the previous line chart, but provide snapshots from just two years – 1991 and 2025 – to more vividly show the contrast over time. Most of the burden shift, we can see, resulted from the elimination of the yellow slice – the business tangible personal property tax.

At the same time the General Assembly eliminated the business tangible personal property tax, it began phasing out the corporate franchise tax and replacing it with a new gross receipts tax known as the commercial activity – or CAT – tax. At that time, the General Assembly earmarked 70 percent of the new CAT tax revenues for primary and secondary education to help offset the loss of the business tangible personal property tax revenue to schools.

But, when the Great Recession of 2007-2009 arrived, the General Assembly eliminated the earmark to schools to help the state address its own fiscal problems.

The combination of these factors takes us to **SLIDE #3**, which illustrates the steady decline of the state's share of K-12 funding. From the early 2000s to 2017, the state annually provided roughly 45 percent of the combined state-local funds for public K-12 schools. The state now provides about 37 percent.

Among the states, Ohio ranks 45th in the state's share of combined state-local per-pupil funding for K-12 education, down from 35th two decades earlier. The national average in 2023 was $9,077 per pupil, while in Ohio it was $6,045 per pupil – 29 percent below the national average. (U.S. Census Bureau)

In fact, if we examine Ohio's traditional school district foundation aid from Fiscal 2002 to the present in inflation-adjusted dollars, state support has declined by 23.5 percent from its peak in Fiscal 2003. Let's look at **SLIDE #4**. In terms of the purchasing power of state foundation aid to traditional districts, it's been reduced by nearly one-fourth over the last two decades.

These are the primary factors that account for The Great Tax Shift in Ohio – the factors that have forced local school districts to rely more and more heavily on property-tax levies. Ohio is a national leader in the frequency of school levies and now has the 8th highest effective residential property tax rate in the nation. (Tax Foundation) No one who has studied these trends can be surprised over why Ohio is experiencing a property-tax revolt.

In an editorial last December, *The Toledo Blade* accurately summarized the problem. (QUOTE) "It's becoming an Ohio government operating principle," the editorial stated, "to pass fiscal pain to the lowest point on the political spectrum and force other elected officials to make the tough decisions avoided in Columbus." (CLOSE QUOTE)

Much of the data we've been discussing can be found in an excellent study (**SLIDE #5**) – published last September by the Ohio Education Policy Institute, authored by former state budget director Greg Browning and Howard Fleeter of Fleeter & Associates, a PhD economist and principal research associate for the Ohio Education Policy Institute. If you have not read it, I strongly encourage you to do so and to keep it handy as a reference guide.

Q: You've provided a thorough and very sobering account of the state's steady retreat from supporting public schools. Is there a correlation between Ohio's retreat from supporting public schools, and its increasing support for private schools?

A: Yes. There is a strong correlation. State funding for public schools and private schools come out of the same pot – the state's General Revenue Fund. Every dollar allocated to private schools is a dollar not available to public schools.

Since state lawmakers expanded the EdChoice program in 2023 to make it a near-universal program – with eligibility for all households up to 450% of the poverty line – participation in the state's voucher programs has dramatically increased.

SLIDE #6, please. As we can see, voucher participation more than doubled from fiscal 2023 to fiscal 2025, causing state payments to expand from $660 million to more than $1.1 billion.

When Franklin County Common Pleas Judge Jaiza Page issued her decision, on June 24, 2025, finding the EdChoice program unconstitutional, she wrote that on a per-pupil basis private schools participating in voucher programs receive about twice as much state support as public schools.

As an example, she noted that in 2024 EdChoice vouchers provided up to $6,166 for students in K-8 and up to $8,408 for students in 9-12, while the state provided about $3,800 per student in the Columbus City Schools.

Judge Page concluded that in the last quarter-century the state has nurtured a QUOTE "second system of uncommon, private schools (that) could never be valid under Article VI, Section 2 of the Ohio Constitution." CLOSE QUOTE.

The case is now pending in Franklin County's 10th District Court of Appeals, and its decision almost certainly will be appealed to the Ohio Supreme Court. We might not know the outcome for another two years or so.

Q: The harsh financial realities you've outlined go a long way to explain why there's so much anxiety in school leadership right now. Yet superintendents have been trained to be careful, measured and neutral, and to stay out of politics. Is that still the right instinct? Or has the moment changed?

A: State law – specifically Section 9.03 of the Ohio Revised Code – prohibits political subdivisions, including school districts, from spending taxpayer money to support or oppose political candidates, ballot issues and the like. However, the law allows school districts to distribute “factual, non-biased information” about school levies, the need for them, the overall financial status of the district and the factors affecting that financial status. In other words, you are permitted to **inform and educate** in a fact-based way.

The charts and graphs we’ve presented this morning, in my view, fit the definition of “factual, non-biased information” on trends in Ohio taxation, school funding, and state support for private schools.

These obviously are very serious trends for Ohio’s schools. Trends that I believe your constituents, your taxpayers, need to understand. I believe you have an obligation to inform and educate your voters about these trends. If I were in your shoes, utilizing the advice and counsel of your district’s legal team and the professional educational organizations to which you belong, I would strive to communicate these facts in a straightforward, matter-of-fact fashion.

Some of you are old enough to remember the TV show “Dragnet,” featuring Detective Sgt. Joe Friday (originally played by Jack Webb). Sgt. Friday’s signature line was: “All we want are the facts, ma’am.”

In my opinion, you need to channel your inner Sgt. Joe Friday in communicating with your constituents. They want the facts. They need the facts about the financial landscape that is shaping how their schools are financed.

Q: What is the cost of staying quiet? What happens to a district when its superintendent is not telling the story?

A: Well, some things are self-evident. The trends of the last two decades in Ohio’s public-school finance are not likely to improve absent a change in Statehouse perceptions of what Ohio taxpayers want. Ohioans need the plain facts to enable them to tell their elected officials what changes they want.

Q: What do we know about what most taxpayers actually understand about where their money goes, and where are the biggest gaps?

A: Well, there is a wealth of national survey data on public understanding and attitudes toward education, from reputable, professional organizations such as Phi Delta Kappa, Gallup, Pew Research, and NORC (National Opinion Research Center) at the University of Chicago. And the Roper Center at Cornell University maintains a vast storehouse of archival data. A consistent finding over decades has been that there is much public confusion over who pays for schools and how much they pay. There also is very little public understanding of the cost of education. There is a lack of understanding that 60 to 70 cents of each dollar spent on K-12 education goes to instruction, pupil support services, and institutional staff support.

At the state and local levels, however, there is a paucity of public opinion survey data. I think it’s rational to assume that in Ohio the information effect or lack-of-information effect likely mirrors what we know from the national surveys. I’d also assume that your own experiences in forums at the district level mirror this reality. It’s always a good idea to do whatever you can to educate your constituents on the financial realities of your schools.

Q: If you are a superintendent sitting in this room today, what is the single most important thing you should do differently starting Monday?

A: The single most important thing, in the realm of communicating with your constituents, is to think, and to communicate, visually. We live in an Era of Information Overload.

Information scientists tell us that average Americans now are exposed to over 100,000 words each day – that’s roughly 34 gigabytes of content in their e-mails, texts, social media feeds, TV, radio, podcasts, streaming and on and on. Americans are drowning in the flood of information and – regrettably – disinformation.

Those information scientists also tell us that, because of this flood, visual communications – clear and easy to understand images – are far superior to text when measuring understanding and retention. People are much more likely to understand and remember visual messaging.

That's why in this presentation, we attempted to convey the most important trends, in visuals. The most important thing: Visuals. The second most important thing: Repetition. Using these visuals over and over and over. Updating them year to year. To drive home the essential facts your constituents need to understand.