

EDUCATION

Ohio schools, parents concerned as lawmakers debate voucher and public school funding

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Two years ago, Ohio did what few other states had done before it: it allowed every family to receive a voucher to pay for private school.

The move was praised by school choice advocates, who said it would give opportunities to children who would never otherwise attend a private school, and criticized by public school leaders, who warned the move would siphon funding for public schools.

Enrollment in the program ballooned in its first year, from 23,333 students receiving vouchers in 2022-23 to 79,728 students in 2023-24. The state will spend \$475.4 million this year on vouchers through the program for about 88,000 students.

Now, Republican lawmakers are considering further expansion, with [savings accounts](#) to allow families to use public funding for private nonchartered schools not eligible for vouchers, even homeschooling. And they are proposing cuts to public schools – [\\$100 million over two years](#) in the governor's budget plan.

Critics say the program is unconstitutional and draining funds from districts that serve all students, not just those accepted into private schools. A coalition of 300 school districts has sued the state, and public school leaders say lawmakers need to hold private schools accountable for public tax dollars they receive.

"As a district in a high-poverty area, asking our families to replace funds being diverted to low-performing nonpublic schools is not only unjust, it is unconstitutional," said Canton City Schools Superintendent Jeffrey Talbert.

Talbert said with the loss of state funding, the district will face cuts in programs and staff and will become increasingly dependent on local property taxes.

Voucher supporters, including GOP legislative leaders, say the program is helping families choose the best school for their children.

"We firmly believe that if the government is going to compel education, then parents ought to be permitted to determine which type of education is best for their kids and their family," said Troy McIntosh, with the Center for Christian Virtue, a lobbying organization based in Columbus.

How does the Ohio voucher program work?

For years, Ohio offered private school vouchers for students with autism or special needs, students who lived in Cleveland, and for students in low-performing schools and districts. The latter, called EdChoice, was expanded to anyone for the 2023-24 school year.

For EdChoice Expansion, the amount families receive for each child depends on income:

Families making less than 450% of the federal poverty line – just under \$145,000 for a [family of four](#) – receive \$6,166 for grades K-8 and \$8,408 for grades 9-12.

Families making more than 450% of the federal poverty line receive less money on a scale based on family income. The lowest scholarship amount is 10% of the full scholarship, \$617 for grades K-8 and \$804 for grades 9-12.

In the first year of expansion, state spending on vouchers exploded. The state will spend \$439.1 million this year and over \$1 billion in the next two years on EdChoice Expansion scholarships alone. That's more than the \$439.1 million estimated when lawmakers voted on the bill in 2022.

By 2027, the state is expected to spend \$1.25 billion, up from \$970 million in 2024, on all five voucher types.

Vouchers are not attracting large numbers of new private school students

When Ohio lawmakers expanded a voucher program for private schools, supporters argued it would give opportunities to children who would never otherwise attend a private school.

That's not what has happened so far. Statewide, the number of EdChoice recipients grew by more than 240% in the last school year, and yet private enrollment in Ohio increased by just more than 2%, which suggests the vast majority of vouchers went to students already enrolled in private schools.

"It's insulting that a program that was pitched as a way to help poor families have choice or escape what they thought were schools that were failing them is now a boondoggle for wealthy families," said Dennis Willard, a spokesperson with Vouchers Hurt Ohio, the coalition of school districts suing the state over the program.

McIntosh, with the Center for Christian Virtue, said the discrepancy is because 2023-24 was the first school year with expanded EdChoice eligibility and Ohio will see more students switching from public schools to private schools in future years.

"The first year is obviously going to be stilted more heavily towards kids who are already in private schools but every year following the opposite is going to be true," he said.

For 2024-25, the program's second year, the number of vouchers increased by 17.5% while the number of private school students increased by 10.5%, according to data from the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce.

More: [As Ohio's private school vouchers swell, who is benefiting?](#)

That the newest expansion vouchers have overwhelmingly gone to families who could already afford private school does not concern top officials, including Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine.

"Everyone, all these people, are paying some taxes. Certainly, some are paying more than others. I don't have a problem with it being used by middle-class families or even upper-middle-class families," DeWine said.

"They're paying state tax, they're paying local property tax, and they ought to be able to get some benefit from the amount of money that they're giving into the education system," he said.

Public schools facing cuts

Opponents of the EdChoice Expansion say it leaves less money available for public schools, which the state has a constitutional obligation to fund. DeWine's proposed budget includes a decrease of over \$100 million for public schools over two years.

Akron Public Schools Treasurer and CFO Steve Thompson has been making regular presentations to his school board about the impact vouchers will have on the district's budget. The district is taking a \$28 million hit just from vouchers going to students who never once set foot in an Akron public school.

Thompson, who has also served as a superintendent in Northeast Ohio school districts, said the expenses go beyond the voucher itself. School districts now also have to pay to transport students who use vouchers and pay for special education needs, such as reading specialists. Public schools have infrastructure and staffing costs that would remain fairly consistent even with declining enrollment.

Thompson said he supports the idea of vouchers for what they were originally intended to be – a way to “help poor, disenfranchised students leave low-performing schools.”

“It’s anything but that now,” Thompson said.

Thompson said he thinks the number of students using a voucher will plateau, as private schools have limited spaces and students still have to qualify to attend the school. The public schools, he said, will be left to continue to serve the highest-need students, the most disenfranchised.

Thompson said he believes the current intention of the Ohio Legislature is “to dismantle public education.”

“And I think that's a grave mistake,” he said.

McIntosh said if vouchers took money away from public schools, people would have seen a decrease in the schools' budgets over the past decade. Instead, he said, the collective cash reserves of Ohio school districts have more than doubled.

It's unclear if that's the case based on data from the Ohio Association of School Finance Officers. School officials have said cash reserves are an imperfect measure of a school district's long-term financial situation and cash balances were inflated with grant money after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Stark County's Plain Local Schools Superintendent Brent May said although the community did not vote to have its tax dollars pay for private school education, legislators continue to permit it.

"The state is creating a two-class system of education in Ohio, and the kids will be hurt in the end," he said.

Ohio House Speaker Matt Huffman, R-Lima, told reporters he believes the voucher programs save taxpayers money because it means fewer students are enrolled in public schools. Huffman

answered questions for this story through a spokesperson, who noted the scholarship amount is far less than the per-student amount school districts receive from the state. On average, [the state pays for \\$7,443 per student](#), according to the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce.

"If parents, who are still contributing their tax dollars to their local school, wish to use a state scholarship to cover the cost of their child's education, then a \$6,166 scholarship for a student in grades K-8 or an \$8,408 scholarship for a high school student is a better deal for the taxpayer than the cost of that same child attending their district school," spokesperson Olivia Wile said.

Voucher helps Canton family choose private schools

Canton resident Samuel Jamerson has a fourth-grade daughter at Heritage Christian School in Canton who has always used an EdChoice voucher for tuition. He said EdChoice vouchers helped his family tremendously.

He chose the school for a Christian education and smaller class sizes than Canton City Schools. Jamerson, a juvenile correctional officer, said that though it would be a strain, he would pay the full [\\$7,500](#) tuition for his daughter to stay in that kind of environment. Jamerson has another child at Tiffin University and said it would be hard to pay the tuition of both schools.

Jamerson attended both public and private schools growing up and his older children attended public schools once they reached middle and high school. He said he sees the benefits of both kinds of education but wants his children to have the extra structure private schools provide when they are young. He said if class sizes were smaller in Canton schools, his school choice would be harder.

Jamerson said he believes all families should have the opportunity to send their children to a school that has the environment they are looking for.

Private schools urge voucher use, not all parents agree

Columbus resident Tara Polansky chose to enroll her daughter at the Columbus Jewish Day School after moving back to the city in 2022 just before the school year began. She was disappointed when school leaders sent a letter to parents at the beginning of the 2023 school year encouraging them to apply for vouchers and decided to speak to the board with another parent about why she felt encouraging vouchers was not in line with the school's values.

"We made a choice to send our child to private school. The idea of taking money away from public school students is not something that I would ever do," she said.

Private schools across Ohio have encouraged parents to take advantage of the increased voucher eligibility. The [Archdiocese of Cincinnati has a calculator](#) for parents to check their EdChoice eligibility on its website.

"A Catholic education has never been more affordable, accessible and exceptional," the site reads.

Polansky said she knows Columbus City Schools is already struggling with its budget and the school board is considering closing schools. She also wants to ensure public schools have the resources to help students with special needs or who are learning English as a second language, since private schools have no state obligation to accept or accommodate those students.

"I don't think my child's education is more important than anybody else's and so I don't want to use public money for that," she said.

After Polansky spoke to school leaders, she said the Columbus Jewish Day School did not send another letter encouraging parents to apply for the vouchers.

Private schools not subject to testing, audits

All Ohio public school students are required to take standardized tests, but only private school students who receive vouchers must take a standardized test, which makes it more difficult for parents to compare performance between their local private and public schools.

A [bill](#) led by former Republican Rep. Bill Seitz and current Republican Rep. Gayle Manning would have created accountability measures for the voucher program. Among them were requirements for private schools to submit a report on how they spent voucher money to the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, to post information like capacity and disciplinary policies and for all voucher recipients to take the same standardized tests as public school students.

Students on school vouchers are required to take exams that test for proficiency for the same school subjects as public school students but are allowed to use alternate exams. Seitz, who is a proponent of school vouchers, said he wanted parents to make stronger decisions with 'apples-to-apples' data on testing.

"Do students perform better, worse or about the same when they are placed in a voucher environment compared to the public school environment? We've heard those debates go on for 25 years and Representative Manning and I thought, well, why don't we try to develop a common metric?" Seitz said.

The bill had many of its provisions stripped when it was replaced by a weaker substitute bill. It eventually failed to pass and [Seitz retired in December](#).

He said this is still worthwhile to explore to give parents adequate information on where to send their child.

"[Manning] and I found out last session that it's a heavy boulder to roll uphill, and I don't think the contours of the General Assembly this time are any more favorable to those ideas than they proved to be last time," Seitz said.

McIntosh said private schools should "absolutely not" be subject to audits, comparing vouchers to SNAP benefits for groceries.

"When a family uses SNAP or WIC money right to buy food at Kroger or Meijer, nobody's calling for Kroger or Meijer to be held up to a public audit. That's a private entity. These all have financial controls in place," he said.

Wile, Huffman's spokesperson, agreed and said accountability for the program comes from parents.

"If they don't like the services their local private school provides, they can leave, and if enough families make that choice, that private school closes," she said.

Wile also noted that private schools are subject to state laws and requirements, including teacher qualifications, curriculum requirements and graduation and diploma requirements.

What's next?

The lawsuit over the voucher program is currently in the Franklin County Court of Common Pleas. It does not yet have a trial date.

Meanwhile, lawmakers are considering creating educational savings accounts for every Ohio students that could be used for any authorized expense, including homeschooling materials or tutoring after school, as in Arizona and Florida.

"We believe that's kind of the gold standard," McIntosh said.

Rep. Phil Robinson, D-Solon, is championing three changes to the voucher program. One would create a tiered system so that the voucher a student receives is based on family income. Above a certain threshold, families would not be eligible for a voucher. Another amendment would create a database or scorecard system for private schools that accept vouchers so parents can compare performance and another would grant the state auditor the ability to audit schools that receive vouchers.

Robinson said he is hoping to find a Republican co-sponsor for the changes. They have a difficult path forward in the majority-Republican Legislature. DeWine must sign the state budget by the end of June.

"We have almost a billion dollars shifting from traditional public school education to vouchers," Robinson said. "At this current time, we don't know how those vouchers are being used. We don't know how students in those schools receiving vouchers are performing, and that does not pass the test of accountability and transparency."

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