RIGHT DOWN the DRAIN

The Costs of Siphoning Billions in Ohio Public Funding into Private School Vouchers

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Preface by Eric S. Brown, Chair, Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding Steering Committee, Former Ohio Chief Justice and Judge (retired)

Foreword by William L. Phillis, Consultant, Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding

OHIO COALITION FOR
EQUITY & ADEQUACY
OF SCHOOL FUNDING

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By Thomas S. Poetter, Alyssa J. DeZeeuw, Emma Errgang, Elijah L. Fenwick-Sanders, Connor J. Goodpaster, Mathew Hall, Susan Korea, Ryan C. Kwapniowski, Erin Laffrey, Rashmika Lekamge, Jessica S. Palatka, Amanda Robinson, & Anthony W. Rose

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Preface

By *Eric S. Brown*, Chair, Steering Committee, Ohio Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding; Former Ohio Chief Justice and Retired Judge

In the judiciary, we are taught that justice is not simply an abstract concept; it is a fiduciary responsibility to the citizens we serve. Central to that responsibility is the duty to ensure that public resources are stewarded with integrity, transparency, and strict adherence to the constitutional mandate. With that promise of accountability, I have overseen the development of this volume.

When I agreed to chair the Steering Committee for the Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding, I did so with a clear intent: to bring the discipline of evidence-based inquiry to the often-heated debate surrounding private school vouchers. Policy decisions, whether in the courtroom or the Statehouse, must be rooted in fact, not sentiment.

Right Down the Drain is not a partisan exercise; it is an audit of public assurances.

The chapters that follow were compiled by the students of Professor Thomas S. Poetter. I have been impressed by the rigor and dispassionate clarity of the analysis. These students have approached the data with due diligence and the logical reasoning of good researchers, effectively stripping away the rhetoric to examine Ohio's public funding record. They have carefully documented the true cost of siphoning public dollars away from our common schools—resources that, by constitutional design, are meant to nourish the future of all children, not a select few.

This book functions as an important bridge between the abstract policy debates in Columbus and the practical reality on the ground in our local districts. It is also a necessary contribution to the historical record of Ohio education, a record that my respected colleague and dedicated champion of public education, William L. Phillis, has long championed.

As you read these pages, I encourage you to view the information as you would documentary evidence in a legal case. The facts regarding the diversion of these funds are revealed here for your consideration. From there, it is up to you, the reader, to weigh this evidence and decide whether the current direction reflects the values and the constitutional obligations we owe to the citizens of this state.

We have a duty to ensure our schools are adequately and equitably funded. This book is a key step toward restoring it.

Note About the Current Lawsuit

The Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding is a Regional Council of Governments, founded in 1991 by public school districts committed to advocating for fair education funding. Our primary mission is to unify efforts to challenge what we believe is an unconstitutional public school funding system in Ohio. I currently serve as Chair of the Steering Committee that oversees the Coalition.

In its first year, the Coalition took the bold step of filing a lawsuit on behalf of Nathan DeRolph, student at Sheridan High School in Perry County, challenging the State's school funding methodology. Through years of litigation, the Coalition achieved important victories, including four Ohio Supreme Court decisions issued between 1997 and 2002 that affirmed that the State's public school funding system did not meet constitutional standards. Ohio's reliance on local property taxes created massive wealth-based disparities between rich and poor districts, violating the Ohio Constitution's commitment to a "thorough and efficient" education.

Twenty years later, in 2022, the Coalition launched another important initiative by filing a lawsuit to address rising concerns about Ohio's EdChoice Voucher program. This case, known as Columbus City Schools, et al. v. State of Ohio, et al., presents claims that differ significantly from those in our previous litigation, marking a new phase in our ongoing mission to ensure that all students in Ohio receive an equitable and adequate education. This initiative is aptly named "Vouchers Hurt Ohio," and we are optimistic about initiating meaningful dialogue around these critical issues. Here are the five claims presented in our current lawsuit:

Count 1 - Creation Of One or More Systems of Uncommon Schools
In this claim, we assert that the EdChoice program unlawfully establishes a parallel system of uncommon private schools, in direct violation of Article VI, Section 2 of the Ohio Constitution.

Funding for the EdChoice private school voucher program comes from the same budget line item that supports public schools. Thus, every public tax dollar allocated to vouchers for private schools amounts to one less dollar available for public education, raising significant constitutional concerns.

Count 2 - Failure to Secure a Thorough and Efficient System of Common Schools
Our Coalition contends that the State has inadequately funded public education. By not fully implementing the Fair School

Funding Plan and simultaneously directing substantial resources into the EdChoice program, the State has created a public school system that lacks both thoroughness and efficiency.

Additionally, constitutionally insufficient funding has compelled local school districts to raise local taxes through levies, a practice that places an undue burden on our communities.

Count 3 - Segregation in Violation of the Thorough and Efficient System of Common Schools

The Coalition expresses serious concern that funding private schools, which may discriminate based on various criteria, contributes to increased segregation in public school districts. This has led to a higher percentage of white students attending private schools through the EdChoice program, further dividing our public schools.

The private school voucher program diverts public funds *and* exacerbates segregation within our public school systems. Private schools often impose selective admission criteria based on academic performance, disciplinary records, financial status, race, and religious affiliation, raising significant constitutional issues.

Count 4 - Unconstitutional State Funding of Religious Schools

The principle within the Ohio Constitution that prevents any religious or sectarian group from having exclusive control over any part of our state's educational funding must be upheld. With more than 90% of private schools in Ohio being parochial, significant taxpayer dollars are directed toward sectarian institutions, which cannot be justified under our Constitution.

Count 5 - Violation of Ohio Constitution Article 1 Section 2

At the foundation of Ohio's Constitution is the belief that ultimate power is vested in Ohio citizens. When we succeed, state legislators will be prevented from funding programs like EdChoice that foster inequitable private schooling, ensuring our education system is equitable and just. We must recognize the EdChoice private school voucher program as unconstitutional and collaborate toward an educational landscape that upholds the dignity and rights of every student in Ohio. Together, we can work toward a brighter future for our schools.

The Franklin County Court of Common Pleas heard this case on Motions for Summary Judgment. Judge Jaiza Page ruled that the Coalition had prevailed on Counts 1, 2, and 4. The State prevailed on Count 5, and Count 3 was undecided, requiring a trial to determine all of the relevant facts. The case was appealed to the Ohio Court of Appeals for District 10, which heard oral arguments in early May 2026. As of this writing, the Appellate Court has not issued a decision.

Foreword

By *William L. Phillis*, Consultant, Ohio Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

The Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding's VOUCHERS HURT OHIO mantra rings true.

The EdChoice voucher scheme in Ohio is a growing blight on the State, a fiscal scourge on school districts, and a curse on students and property taxpayers. This voucher scheme is unsustainable. It is past time that public school advocates call it what it is: an existential threat to the constitutionally-required public common school system. State officials should blush with shame for their support of this dishonorable, unconstitutional program, but some have no capacity to blush regarding the matter.

The Universal EdChoice private school voucher program in Ohio had predecessors. In November 1991, President George H. W. Bush, speaking to an Ohio audience of State Department of Education officials, other state officials, public school administrators, teaching personnel, and public education advocates, stated that Ohio had adopted an open enrollment policy and should now "go the whole nine yards and give a school voucher to every student."

A Universal Voucher Program at that time had minuscule support from the general public and public officials. Nevertheless, then-Governor George Voinovich stated publicly that the idea should be studied. A "Parent Choice Commission" was appointed by the governor to study the concept. The Governor chose Akron industrialist, David Brennan, a political ally and school choice advocate, to chair the study commission. Brennan and the Catholic Bishops of Ohio had unrestrained influence on the composition of the Commission.

The Commission recommended that each Ohio school district issue a voucher to each student for use in private schools or school district schools; hence, the recommendation was for a universal voucher scheme from the beginning. That recommendation was not well received by the legislature or the general public, but the Voinovich-Brennan duo pushed forward with unchecked passion. The struggling Cleveland Public school system was easy prey for politicians on which to impose a voucher pilot project. With the support of a somewhat reluctant legislature, Voinovich thrust a pilot voucher program into the Cleveland School District.

Brennan, as a school choice supporter, wielded great influence on the Commission's final report. He had a financial interest in becoming involved in the privatization of public schools. Brennan started some private schools in Cleveland to participate in the pilot project. The low level of funds for each Cleveland voucher did not seem attractive to Brennan; therefore, he shifted his political support to a charter school initiative, which eventually yielded huge financial rewards to Brennan's charter school enterprise.

The Cleveland Scholarship Program (voucher program), which required the Cleveland School District to set aside $5 million of the district budget to fund the program, began in 1995.

From this humble voucher beginning, Governor Voinovich and a few loyal allies in the legislature connived to expand vouchers by including vouchers in the State budget bills, all at the 11th hour while the public was unaware of the matter. Voucher legislation in Ohio has never been passed in a standalone legislative proposal and has always been inserted in the State budget bill at the 11th hour.

Those who control the Ohio legislature during the State budget process this year (2026) argued that the Cupp/Patterson Fair School Funding Plan was unsustainable, i.e., it would cost more money than the State can afford. Concurrently, however, the lawmakers fully funded the EdChoice voucher scheme, which sucks billions from the State budget line-item traditionally set aside only for funding school districts; hence, students in school districts are now hurting. VOUCHERS HURT STUDENTS.

It is shameful that most of the new EdChoice vouchers are given to private schools for students who were already enrolled in private schools. Public school funds are being shifted away from school districts to more affluent private school patrons. The transfer of state funds from school districts to affluent parents is reprehensible.

A somber irony rises from the rhetoric that the voucher initiators moralized to justify the original voucher scheme. They sermonized that vouchers would give poor kids the same opportunity for a private education as wealthy kids. Most of the last batch of EdChoice vouchers, however, were provided to more affluent parents whose students had already been enrolled in a private school. Private schools are raising tuition due to the availability of voucher funds; hence, poor kids have been left out of the private school voucher equation, largely due to finances. VOUCHERS HURT POOR KIDS.

Since the State under-funds the constitutionally-required common school system, school district boards of education must then ask property taxpayers to pass more local levies, which, in turn, exacerbates the property tax crisis in Ohio. School boards must operate on a balanced budget and have no choice but to seek additional property tax (or school district income tax) and/or reduce programs and services to students. VOUCHERS HURT PROPERTY TAXPAYERS.

The alternative is to deny students educational opportunities, which is contrary to the constitutional provision that requires the General Assembly to secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools. VOUCHERS HURT STUDENTS.

Three decades ago, the Ohio Supreme Court ordered the State to reduce reliance on property tax in the school funding formula and fix the school funding formula in order to secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools. At the same time that the Ohio Supreme Court ordered the State to fix the school funding formula, state level politicians initiated new school choice programs, contrary to the Ohio Constitution. Instead of fixing the public school funding system as ordered by the Court, they made the matter worse by draining funds away from the public system. The EdChoice Expansion voucher program is costing billions while the State continues to operate an unconstitutional common school system. VOUCHERS HURT SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND COMMUNITIES.

The fact that Ohio is falling behind as an economic engine can be attributed to a decline in state financial support for public K-12 education. Certain powerful state officials have shifted state fiscal support from school districts to the voucher scheme.

The conclusion of the matter is that the EdChoice voucher scheme is hurting students, property taxpayers, particularly senior citizens, and school districts as community centers. VOUCHERS HURT THE STATE OF OHIO.

State officials must be held accountable for their malfeasance. They take an oath of office to uphold the Ohio Constitution. They have failed to do so. Article VI, Section 2 of the Ohio Constitution is clear: The Ohio General Assembly is obligated to secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools and not appropriate one dime to private religious schools.

Article I, Section 2 of the Ohio Constitution begins with the Statement, "All political power is inherent in the people." The legislative districts in Ohio have been designed to put all political power in the hands of the leaders of a majority political party, thus diminishing the power of the people. The powers that be in the Ohio legislature would not want to submit the EdChoice Expansion voucher scheme to a vote of Ohioans. The voucher scheme is in full bloom in Ohio because the legislature, as a body, is out of sync with a majority of Ohioans on the voucher issue. Fortunately, the judicial branch of government is available to the people for redress.

The Ohio Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding filed the Vouchers Hurt Ohio (VHO) lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the EdChoice private school voucher scheme in

January 2022. In June 2025, Franklin County Court of Common Pleas Judge Jaiza Page ruled the scheme unconstitutional. The case was heard in the 10th District Court of Appeals on May 12, 2026. A decision from the 10th District Court of Appeals is expected in late 2026.

Meanwhile, Ohioans should be expressing their concern regarding the unconstitutional EdChoice Expansion voucher scheme because VOUCHERS HURT OHIO.

Those who read this book, if convinced that the EdChoice voucher scheme is an existential threat to the public common school system, may wish to join the effort to inform others about the EdChoice voucher threat. The Coalition leadership is very confident that the attorneys for the Plaintiffs presented a death blow to the EdChoice voucher scheme during the May 12, 2026, hearing before the 10th District Court of Appeals.

The Miami University students have performed a beneficial public service by researching the EdChoice voucher scheme and recording the results of their research as presented in this book. Their contribution to this resource to help the public understand the harm being heaped on public common school students by the unaccountable and unconstitutional EdChoice voucher scheme is laudable.

An Early Note to Readers

By *Thomas S. Poetter*, Professor, Department of Educational Leadership, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, July 1, 2026

I had the pleasure of teaching a course called Curriculum Politics and Policy in Summer 2026. The purpose was to engage the 12 students—all doctoral students in Educational Leadership (EDL) at Miami University—in the issues regarding one of the most contentious curriculum and policy issues of our time: The State of Ohio's implementation of the EdChoice Voucher Expansion funding scheme.

The EdChoice Expansion program was implemented by the Ohio state legislature and governor in 2023 to funnel a record $2.5 Billion dollars per biennium of public taxpayer money earmarked for public education into private schools through a voucher program. The decision came at a time when the legislature could have used that same money, originally earmarked for public schools, to fund our public education programs fairly, equitably, and justly through the Cupp-Patterson Fair School Funding Plan, now suspended due to EdChoice Expansion. The fallout from the expansion of Ohio's voucher program is devastating to our public education system in Ohio and has created an ongoing existential crisis all at the same time for the State and for its citizens. That crisis is embodied in the noble work of the Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding, its lead consultant William Phillis, the Coalition's Steering Committee, and the 300+ Public School Districts in Ohio fighting the voucher program expansion through the lawsuit Vouchers Hurt Ohio.

EdChoice Voucher Expansion, in my view, has and always will be a curriculum issue because every single aspect of school funding impacts the curriculum, not only down to the basic questions related to curriculum inquiry concerning what gets taught in school classrooms but also to the broader curriculum questions of what education is for in a democratic republic and then by extension we arrive at a number of deeper questions. How does a thriving capitalistic, pluralistic society based on democratic principles pay for education? Who wins and who loses when political decisions about funding hurt broad populations and benefit only a very narrow few? Are the decisions for how we fund and care about and nurture our educational systems just, fair, equitable, and lead to stronger outcomes for all learners? How do the decisions we make as a society, as well as by those in power, impact the lives and possibilities of those who benefit from or suffer with those decisions and outcomes? These are all curriculum questions directed at critical issues for all.

Our class project, this book, is a work of education policy advocacy—a response to the curriculum and educational issues embodied in the EdChoice Voucher Expansion fiasco—with the goal of capitalizing on the class's knowledge of scholarship surrounding the policy and its implementation; their experiences with the policy as educators, researchers, and citizens; their understanding of the academic ideas and the facts of the matter with regard to the policy; and the educational possibilities in play, along with the moral and ethical, legal and political, social and cultural questions at hand as well. All along, we planned to forward arguments defending public education and championing efforts to reverse what we find to be educationally, politically, and legally unsound in the EdChoice Voucher Policy, embodied in the State budget and tied to actual public dollar payouts to private educational providers without audit, all at the expense of public schools and all of Ohio's citizens, even those, we would argue, who are "benefiting" from the voucher program.

As we made our way through the readings in the course, we began surfacing key points that we thought we wanted to make about the EdChoice Voucher Expansion Policy and all that it is doing and not doing. We began to pick up almost immediately as a class that certain idioms were surfacing that seemed very succinctly—though not literally, of course—to frame what we thought was happening, what we were learning, and what we thought should be done about it. Some of the early idioms we discussed were "Robbing Peter to Pay Paul" and "All That Glitters Isn't Gold," etc. We quickly began fleshing out the main points that we wanted to make in this volume and began writing in chapter teams to share what we were learning together using 7 idioms that rose to the top (among others that we mix in along the way!) that constitute the heart of the book and the titles of the chapters herein.

Our book title, of course, is an idiom as well. When we came up with it at the end of our work together, we were inspired by the artwork on the book's cover by public school art teacher/public school board member Jodi Kessler. What better way to call out and challenge Ohio's school funding system than to point out that our legislature is sending more than a Billion dollars a year of public money to private schools without audit than to state that the EdChoice Expansion Voucher Program feels to us like throwing public money right down the drain? And more important, we dedicated our work to pointing out to the public that cares about our present and future lives together and the health and well-being of our democratic republic in as many ways as possible to understand the flaws in this policy and to advocate for reversing the losses that we have experienced under this devastating political and educational budget regime.

Join us by sharing this book with friends and family and colleagues and skeptics. Communicate and build on the main points here in *Right Down the Drain: The Costs of Siphoning Billions in Ohio Public Funding into Private School Vouchers* and support the Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding's case, Vouchers Hurt Ohio, challenging the State's ravenous voucher scheme. As the Coalition's lead consultant, William Phillis, would argue, the court's opinion is important, but the court of public opinion holds even more sway. Citizens, ultimately, will be responsible (or not) for stopping the massive transfer of public funding to private hands in its tracks. Please join us on this journey by sharing widely the ideas you read about here and arguments made in this book.

Chapter 1

Making a Mountain out of a Molehill? You Bet I Am, Sort of!

An Introduction to This Policy Advocacy Book Project

By *Thomas S. Poetter*

I Don't Hate Moles

Literally, and it's true, we have a nice yard in Cincinnati. We're lucky to have it, but some mowing is necessary. It's not a year-round chore, though in season it's strenuous, especially during the steamy summer months. I do have to allow time, and I have to have the energy for mowing, both of which can be in short supply at times. My cardiologist thinks it's a good idea for me to keep mowing as long as I can do it myself. "It's good exercise," she says, since there are some steep sections of the yard that I can't mow with a riding mower, so I have to push-mow them. Overall, I'd say I like taking care of the yard, especially when ranking it with other regular chores. When finished, I usually get a feeling of accomplishment—by making something a bit tattered look nice again. Plus, I like being outside; and if I time up the work right, I can listen to my beloved Cincinnati Reds on the radio while I mow.

That said, I notice when mowing that sections of the yard get overrun with mole hills. I have moles, as does everyone in our neighborhood. Moles tear up the yard with their braided tracks of dirt displacing and ruining some of the regular grass. I get right up close to the hills on occasion, running over them (it can't be helped), and musing about the moles' lives spent mostly underground eating worms and grubs. Not my idea of fun, certainly. But building these tunnels and policing them is how moles trap the worms and grubs they need to survive.

I know some neighbors attack their moles with traps and poison. But I just can't do that. I don't hate moles. I like my yard, but in terms of the big picture of life on this planet, I don't have a problem with moles. Yes, they make a mess of the yard, sometimes, but the hills go away over time. The fact is that this is what moles do; they have to eat, too. This "destructive" digging and yard trashing is what the world has taught them to do to catch their breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And they have been around much longer than we have, probably. I unreluctantly choose just to live with the molehills, and subsequently with the moles.

Who am I to mess with nature by taking up another assault against moles? I don't think moles are protected, but that doesn't matter. They are part of nature, and since we need to keep the planet healthy and balanced—in a very complex, interlocking system of habitats that are challenged by humans and development and nature itself all of the time—I've got no existential problem with moles. However, I admit that mice in the house will cause me to take action; I guess we all have limits. It's safe to say I have no truck with mice. But the rule of thumb for me is that the ecosystem thrives when nature simply takes its course out of doors.

Indoors is another matter. When "varmints" rise to throw things out of balance, I'm more than willing to join the fight. But I don't think the next harrowing threat is a mole, just scraping out its existence in my yard building hills… It's a mouse in the house.

Get Outta My House, Mouse!

My wife and I like going out to eat for breakfast on the weekends. There's maybe nothing better than eggs and pancakes to start off a rest period following a busy week. So, one summer morning in 2023, just after I had put the finishing touches on a book with students titled *Vouch for This! Defunding Private Interests, Defending Public Schools* (Poetter, 2023) that took the then "new" voucher funding scheme in Ohio to task (the EdChoice Voucher Expansion), we headed out for breakfast at a nearby diner that friends said we just had to try. Little did we know that the explosion of popularity the diner had been experiencing would lead to a long wait time, but we didn't really care. We knew that a wait meant that the food was good. People sometimes wait in Cincinnati for "the mediocre" (for example, I buy a 20-game season ticket package every year to watch my Reds mostly lose in person), but not usually for breakfast. Expecting something exceptional, we waited.

As we stood in line, people kept piling in and crowding in. I still didn't mind, until one gentleman (in his early 40s or so) decided now would be the time to talk as loudly as he could (Of course, I'm sure this probably wasn't a recent development) with friends who had just come in the door behind him and whom he hadn't seen for a while.

"George! Kim! Wow, great to see you guys!"

"Jerry, my man! (bro hug) And Laura! Lovely as ever (side hug)."

Everyone shook hands and hugged a little more and exchanged pleasantries. Then, Jerry dropped the anchor that keeps dragging me to the bottom of the lake.

"You know, George, our son Kit just got accepted into Morgan High School (private, religious, elite) and is starting this coming Fall as a Freshman. We had little hope of getting that new bass boat if he got accepted because the tuition would eat up most of our expendable income, but that new voucher the State is giving away? Wow, did you know that it pays the entire bill for the whole year, so it's smooth sailing? Know what I'm saying?" he guffaws.

He waited for that rare silent opening to score: "So … we just closed on the new boat last night!"

High fives all around. The wives beamed with pride.

I stare up at the ceiling, blank, nearly blacking out now, with part of my soul drifting away from me, dead, and the other part jabbing at my heartstrings with disgust, dismay, and disbelief.

But now, also witnessing the celebration and simultaneously seeing my reaction taking shape, my wife grabs my arm, squeezing it tight, which is the universal message for me:

> <u>NOT TO RESPOND IN ANY WAY, SHAPE, OR FORM!</u>
> <u>NOT TO CAUSE A SCENE BY MAKING A WISECRACK OR FLASHING A RUDE STARE!</u>
> <u>DO… NOT… DO… IT!</u>

Then the waitress called, "Tom, your table's ready. Right this way please."

I followed my life partner (which she still is, though it's questionable if that status would've held if not for her quick vice grip to my arm) to the table. We sat in silence for several minutes scanning the menu, not looking up. Both of us stewing.

I finally said, breaking the ice, calmly, "I think it's time to call the exterminator, by the way. I think we have mice. I saw one scampering around in the basement, happy as a lark."

She said, "I'll make the call. I'm all in. It's time for them to go. And what about the moles? I saw all the hills in the yard."

"Nah," I said, "The moles aren't hurting anyone. But the mice gotta go."

Then we ate our breakfast, though it wasn't as good as it could have been if the mood in our universe hadn't taken such a sudden turn, with the knowledge that part of the money we would put down on our breakfast would be going toward Jerry's new bass boat and toward his son's new school, whose values and approaches don't align with ours. A double whammy, to say the least. Sobering, to say the least. The least.

Questions, Questions

Several early questions to be asking here are, "How many people in that restaurant that day knew that nearly $1.3 BILLION dollars they helped the State accrue that year through taxes (including the taxes that day on their own meals!) would be spent by the State on private education expenses that most of them didn't incur or know about? How many of them still don't know? If they did know, would they care? If they found out, would they join the efforts to stop it, to eradicate that expenditure from existence?" Where do you stand?

Did the patrons sitting in that cozy spot know that the total annual state budget in Ohio is @ $43 Billion? That the annual EdChoice Voucher Expansion Budget is @ $1.22 Billion, or @ 2.84% of the overall annual budget? That the State tax in Ohio on goods is 5.75% (meals in restaurants are taxed)? That a $35 bill in a restaurant yields @ $2 to the State, and that at least 5 cents of every $35 tab in a restaurant in Ohio then goes into the coffers to pay for Jerry's tuition voucher ($2x .0284%) (Morris, 2025)? Just do the math with me! Meaning, every time you spend $35 in a restaurant in Ohio, you throw a nickel at Jerry or at his boat! Or on any other type of purchase in Ohio every time you spend $35…That's more than 20 billion nickels! That would certainly bury Jerry and his new boat as well.

One premise of this book is that we need more people to know that Jerry bought a boat for his own private use with money that he should have used to pay for his son's private school tuition, which was footed by people who ate their breakfast in that restaurant with him that day, gave a portion of their treasure to the State meant to support public works, which then turned around and handed it over to private interests (to Jerry and to his family's private education provider) with no regulations designed to monitor the money's use or the promise of a follow up audit to make sure no foul play occurred with such vast sums. Ohio, as you know, knows something about foul play in education funding (See the ECOT debacle, Smith, 2022). Meanwhile, most of the other parents in that room gave all of the nickels that should have gone to their own kids' public school to Jerry's son's new private school.

I wonder if they all called the mouse exterminator on Monday, too, like I did.

Now What?

Voucher advocates and takers are in the house now, are chipping at us, squealing at us with glee, and operating with what always felt like and probably is an illegal use of state funding—the funneling of public funds into private schools through vouchers for private school tuition. Like the cover of this book suggests, all of that money, in my opinion, is going right down the drain, out of our reach, money that should have gone to public schools. It's not unlike having a mouse in the house that becomes mice that eat everything and destroy everything in sight that they touch. Be sure of this: There are mice in the house.

But the Coalition for Equity & Advocacy for School Funding (Ohio E&A) is leading the fight against this wasteful madness, along with 300+ public school districts in Ohio to eradicate the funding scheme. Opposition in the Ohio General Assembly to the State budgets in 2023 and 2025 couldn't stop the EdChoice Expansion, but the Ohio E&A and public school advocates are trying to stop it with everything they have—with a lawsuit called Vouchers Hurt Ohio!—and with public action, including the distribution of this book to educate everyone who opens it about what is happening and what is at stake and perhaps to influence action to correct the mistakes that have been made on a massive scale to date (now in the billions of dollars down the drain, all unrecoverable).

My wife and I both know that eradicating mice that get into our house is an expensive endeavor. We have footed the bill before. Sad story. We know better now. Once those critters take hold, they learn to love their surroundings. They will hold onto "their new turf" with everything they have. We know all about it, having hired several companies to help us with our mice problem. With mice, acting tomorrow is too late. That's why the time to act is now with any problem that only stands to get worse and worse as the clock ticks on and the nickels keep flowing into dollars and more … stacking up, adding up, burying you in debt, or at least in losses.

As Welner et al. (2023) explain, those who receive the benefits of a voucher scheme "are much more deeply impacted by the policy than are the dispersed population of taxpayers footing the bill, so those parents and private schools tend to form organizations that become a political force protecting and trying to expand the programs" (p. 4). We know that the longer this voucher funding scheme goes on the harder it will be to reverse it as those benefiting from it dig in deeper, build their systems of defense, and make themselves at home. And voucher advocates have powerful allies. They have a supermajority in the Ohio legislature that is firmly committed to EdChoice Voucher Expansion. They have groups and lawyers defending their turf in the Vouchers Hurt Ohio! case that was heard by the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals in May 2026 and is headed toward hearings before other legal bodies in the near future.

Some people might say back, "A nickel here and there? What's the big deal? So what?" In this telling, the big deal is that a nickel is the symbol of a tangible thing (as well as a very real money thing!) that has value and that is given away every single time we spend a relatively small sum in our state. And shouldn't the fact that the idea of giving public money to private education, which the Ohio Constitution clearly defines as illegal, give us pause, whether we are paying for something we shouldn't be paying for (like someone else's private education) OR receiving something we shouldn't (like a private education at taxpayer expense)? People can come up with their own justifications for doing illegal things, but the moral and ethical weight of taking the money is already an issue for many who qualify for it. Much is at stake on both sides of this issue, this situation, this struggle.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

5.27.2026

Many, if not most, private schools demand private school parents apply for vouchers.

By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding

Since the advent of public schooling in Ohio in 1824, a large slice of the private school sector has solicited or demanded public tax support. Some of the most conscientious private school patrons do not wish to take EdChoice vouchers, but the private school demands that they sign up for a voucher regardless. In some cases, private school patrons have pushed back on that demand from their private school. In many cases, some private school patrons indicate that it is against their religious values to take tax funds to support their religious values.

Maybe the bigger deal beyond the moral and ethical issues that we will examine more closely throughout this book is the fact that those lost nickels are having an impact already in real time on our own public schools, open and staffed for all students, no matter who the students are, what they know, where they come from, or how they learn. Students cannot be turned away by public schools like they can be by private schools, and they do get turned away and/or rerouted by private schools, often back to the public schools. Across the board in almost every school district in Ohio, we can't get adequate funding in place for our public schools let alone make up the deficits that the State has created with its EdChoice Voucher Expansion. Students and teachers and parents and schools and communities are paying the price for this program, and the negative outcomes are stacking up all around us. The fact of the matter is that all those "nickels" make a difference, and they aren't being spent on the students they were meant for.

This book is an effort to turn that tide by educating the public about what is happening and what is at stake.

How This Project Came to Be and How It Takes Shape

Every time I write an opening to a book written with students and dig into the details of how a project like this one arose and took on a life of its own, I bask in the wonder of how the world acts in mysterious ways to put the right people in the right place, sometimes at least. So, it came to pass very quickly and over time that we all had the opportunity to work with William Phillis and the Ohio E&A, which added so much to the project, its trajectory, its value, and its possibilities.

I worked with William in 2023 on the book, V*ouch for This!* (Poetter, 2023), just as the lawsuit Vouchers Hurt Ohio! was gaining traction. He and the Ohio E&A had previously been supportive of my work with students in 2015 when we published a book about the negative impacts on public education, students, teachers, and citizens from the standardization and testing movements in Ohio (Poetter & Googins, 2015). The book on vouchers in 2023 was timely, solid, and got some traction but wasn't really accessible to the Ohio population since it was mostly about the wider issues of vouchers and standardization. But it kept William and me in touch, and when an opportunity to teach a knowledge production course with doctoral students came into view in the Spring of 2026 for execution in Summer 2026, the stars aligned.

The alignment included having 12 strong doctoral students who were interested in education policy and in writing for publication coming on the heels of the May 2026 hearing of the appeals by the U.S. 10th Circuit Court of Appeals of the findings of the Franklin County Common Pleas Court in favor of the Ohio E&A in October 2025; and understanding that a push was needed for more public education and advocacy regarding the effort to stop voucher expansion in Ohio. William and I began talking about a book project to reflect the current and historical importance of the EdChoice Voucher Program and the response of the Ohio E&A through its lawsuit during the Fall of 2025.

William and I agreed that, if I could get the students together in a course, we could put together a treatment that he and the Ohio E&A could share with the wider populace as a primer on the problems taking shape in Ohio with the loss of billions of dollars of public money to private schools and the need for the public to be aware and care about it. The more school districts involved, the better. The more citizens aware and advocating, the better. William taught me that, "The court of law is one thing, and very important. But the court of public opinion is <u>the</u> thing-the most important thing."

The resulting course that yielded this book took place during the Summer of 2026. We had an opening reading list that the students did a great job with; I could tell from our early conversations in the course how interested the students were in the EdChoice Voucher Expansion Program and the issues it was causing for the Ohio public education system. In our sessions we took notes on and discussed more than 70 of the Ohio E&A's blog posts over the past two years. We read articles and book chapters about policy advocacy, education policy, and vouchers, and through our discussions about all of this material, we began to sketch the outline of chapters for a book on the topic that we framed as a work of policy advocacy (Baxter et al. 2025; Berends, 2021; Cowan, 2023; Danninger et al., 2004; Kang, 2022; Lubienski et al., 2023; Phillis, 2023; Poetter, 2023; Senese & Winters, 2025; Weiner, 2022; Yoon et al., 2024; Young & Quinn, 2012).

We used the following definition for our policy advocacy work on this project:

> Policy advocacy is the process of negotiating and mediating a dialogue through which influential networks, opinion leaders, and, ultimately, decision makers take ownership of your ideas, evidence, and proposals, and subsequently act upon them. (Young & Quinn, 2012, p. 26)

We hoped that our ideas and the work here would have some influence. However, we understood that it may take some time before any tangible, public acts in support of the ideas and positions expressed in this text could be traced back to this work, if ever. In the end, we are advocating several positions (as reflected in the chapter titles), as well as supporting the ongoing work in multiple contexts of citizens pursuing fair funding of Ohio's public education system.

We quickly made decisions on several topics we would address as well as design and style aspects of the book that we thought were important and that we could agree on. We decided that we would have seven chapters, with five of the chapters co-authored and two solo authored (including my opening here and Chapter 8) and with an agreement that everyone would be available to coach and add and edit every chapter, even after the course formally ended.

After the first few course sessions, I distributed a sample outline for the chapters based on our early discussions and to give the book a balanced, consistent "feel" for the reader. I thought that the book should reflect a couple of early commitments to William and the Ohio E&A as well as elements/aspects that had emerged in our early course sessions. The most significant commitment to the Ohio E&A and to William was to feature the writing of the Ohio E&A through its effective and informative and ever-present Blog Posts distributed to the public widely by email several times a week. In addition, we wanted William and the leadership of the Ohio E&A to have a significant, particular voice in the book, so William and Eric Brown contributed the preface and foreword to this volume. To make these commitments happen, as chapter authors, we feature at least three Blog Posts in each of the chapters that follow. We build the Blogs into the chapters and either use them to solidify/reflect points we are trying to make or use them to build points we would like to make. In the end, we thought our work should reflect the deep and meaningful work that the Ohio E&A has been doing over time to forward its message and build its case through Vouchers Hurt Ohio!

We also found ourselves surfacing idioms in our earliest conversations as a class that began capturing the movement and flow of the points we wanted to make in this volume. I stumbled onto "Making a mountain out of a molehill" while mowing the yard after our second class meeting. I thought, "These poor moles, everyone is trying to kill them when they are just doing their job" (compare to people bad mouthing public schools, often based on limited experience with them and as influenced by false narratives about their usefulness and effectiveness). All along "the real varmint in my life, is the mouse," I thought (compare to private entities, and other citizens like Jerry et al., quietly making their way into my home finances, causing more damage than can be handled by months of paychecks, and silently taking what isn't legitimately theirs—my yard is one thing, but my basement and attic are another!).

How about the pressure coming to my property taxes as the levels of state and local funding plummet and as vouchers soar in value and use and as those funds are drained away slowly but surely from the public schools? The idiom captures the irony of just how little people know about the EdChoice Voucher Expansion problem and how much shouting and gnashing of teeth is needed for any progress to be made to reverse the movement and restore order. We have a tiff over how much schools should be regulated and controlled (what's taught in them, for instance, how much teachers make, how much schools cost to run, etc.) while we pump billions into unregulated private schools and allow private school teachers to teach whatever they want with no questions asked! Yes, I'm making a mountain out of a molehill, but I don't mind the "moles." What I really can't stand are the "mice."

We also committed to writing personal essays about our lives and educational experiences to reflect how our and others' lives and work been impacted by the voucher movement. In each chapter, we reflect on the literature and the research around vouchers and how they illuminate the stakes of the movement and what people should know about it. At the end of each chapter, we offer a set of conclusions we hope the reader will take with them into their further reading.

My Three Main Points to Share – Not Meant to Steal ANY Author's Thunder Here

I want to make three points in the remaining sections of this opening chapter to whet the reader's appetite for what is coming but without producing undo replication in the book. My hope is that the writing mirrors the tone and format and substance of the chapters to come.

First, I do love a good piece of history, especially if a historical document really makes a significant point that may have been mostly lost in the historical record. For me, President Ulysses S. Grant's message at the end of his second term in 1875 struck a chord and is foundational.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

12.15.2025

September 29, 1875, President Ulysses S. Grant speaking to the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Army of Tennessee. (https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-ninth-annual-meeting-the-army-the-tennessee-des-moines--iowa?ref=forwardky.com)
By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding

President U.S. Grant had been the final commander of the Union Army during the Civil War. No doubt he had a close-up view of the bloodbath, havoc, and destruction inherent in the Civil War. For certain he would have formed convictions on what caused the war and steps the nation must take to avoid a repeat of such war. It should not be surprising that Grant emerged from the war experience with a strong conviction that a good common school system is essential. Grant certainly would have observed that the South was lacking a common school system, while the North was in the process of perfecting a common school system. His advice and admonition regarding the common school is as relevant and essential today as in the 1870s, possibly more so.

> Let us all labor to add all needful guarantees for the more perfect security of free thought, free speech and a free press, pure morals, unfettered religious sentiments and of equal rights and privileges to all men (sic), irrespective of nationality, color or religion. Encourage free schools, and resolve that not one dollar of money appropriated to their support, no matter how raised,

> shall be appropriated to the support of any sectarian school. Resolve that either the State or nation, or both combined, shall support institutions of learning sufficient to afford to every child growing up in the land the opportunity of a good, common school education, unmixed with sectarian, pagan or atheistical tenets. Leave the matter of religion to the family circle, the church, and the private school, supported entirely by private contribution. Keep the Church and State forever separate. With these safeguards I believe the battles which created us "The Army of the Tennessee," will not have been fought in vain. (American Presidency Project Website, 2026)

Those who are working to destroy the common school system either have not learned from history or realize that the destruction of the public common school is necessary to accomplish their goal of creating a permanent underclass.

When I first read these words by President Grant in William's post in late 2025, I wondered why I had never seen them before. How did this speech segment get buried beneath our public consciousness? Yes, the speech was given a long time ago (150 years now!), but it contains both the surfacing and clarifying of key freedoms for all that still resonate today, along with the insight that those freedoms should accrue to everyone and that some of them depend on keeping the State and religion separate. The words are stunningly straightforward, passionate, and clear.

According to Grant, a free nation thrives when religious liberty is unfettered by the State, which means the functions and institutions supporting the two institutions—religion and government—especially as they dovetail in public places such as our common schools, must remain separate, "unmixed with sectarian, pagan, or atheistical tenets," and also that private schools should only be supported "by private contribution." But these commitments have eroded in the 21st century, to the point where it seems difficult to untrack them, considering key decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court that have mingled public life and religion in ways unthought of, perhaps even thought to be un-American, at least, merely a generation ago (Poetter, 2023, p. xxx).

The transformative power of Grant's words for me is embedded in the fact that these ideas have been resonant, key aspects of our lives as citizens in the United States, together, for hundreds of years. And they have mostly held, until now. We have freedom to pursue our dreams and purposes, legally and at our own expense. We gather freedom from oppression when we exercise our freedoms, for instance by practicing religion or not, in ways that do not involve the government formally. The idea of separating church and state is an idea and a practice that supports freedom. But, as is evident in the current political milieu in Ohio, even the supermajority threatens the autonomy of the "private" by proposing legislation that will force government scrutiny on private enterprises and religious bodies because they are taking state money. The State audits what it gives away (Hancock, 2026). This will most definitely erode freedom. But what can we hope for when the State is giving public money away for private gain? Our only hope is that the State reverses its decision to fund EdChoice, either by court ruling or referendum if forced to do so, and stops the massive flow of so many of our nickels into the hands of privateers who typically work outside of an audit culture. My bet is that they would not thrive within one.

As stated before (Poetter, 2023), I have nothing against private education or religion. I have benefited from private education in multiple ways over my long life and career, taking two degrees from private institutions of higher education (Heidelberg University and Princeton Theological Seminary) and teaching in two private educational institutions (Culver Academies and Trinity University [TX]) amidst the various public education experiences I have been fortunate to have through my public schooling K-12 in St. Marys, Ohio, my doctorate from Indiana University, and teaching at Miami University now for 30 years. But those private education opportunities/possibilities came through personal investment and endeavor, not from financial aid from the State. My interest in a private education during those periods of my life meant that I had to pay my own way, and I did.

All I can say to Jerry after three years of stewing is that I hope Kit is doing well in school and that the decisions to take the money, both by Jerry and the private education provider, are immoral and probably illegal. There's no way that citizens can get their many, many billions of nickels back, as far as I can tell (it takes 20 billion nickels to make a billion dollars, just to clarify the math mentioned earlier).

But maybe we can stop the flow of those billions and billions of nickels—which every reader in Ohio, no matter their stripe, is paying as we speak—in the direction of coffers that were already being filled by citizens interested in pursuing a private education and paying for it! After all, 90% of people receiving vouchers in Ohio were already paying tuition at private schools before receiving a voucher (Stein, 2025). The idea that private "choices" would serve the poor so they could escape under-performing public schools and strawman arguments like "vouchers guarantee choice" when it's always still the private schools that have choice of whom or whom not to admit litter the litany of countless tropes that are false signifiers for what was really going on behind the curtain: Voucher advocates want to destroy public schools and use the money for their own projects or to build their own wealth.

Second, if you think for a minute, that the overall plan of the mice in the house ISN'T THE COMPLETE DISMANTLING OF THE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM IN OHIO, THEN YOU'RE HEAD IS BURIED IN THE SAND. Check out William's Blog below from June 15, 2026.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

6.15.2026

Editorial Board, Cleveland.com and the Plain Dealer in a June 3, 2026 editorial expose a dirty trick effort by some State of Ohio political folks to seize low-performing public schools without due process or compensation to citizens who paid for them.
By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding

The attached June 3 Editorial provides details of the nefarious plan of some state officials to essentially take control of low-performing school districts and even transfer control to a private entity. Since the Reagan administration, the public common school system has been under attack by some federal and state politicians. During the intervening four-plus decades, the public common school system has withstood the attacks and maintained the support of the communities of which they are a part of. This atrocious proposal ranks high in dirty tricks to destroy the public common school system.

> Bid to Privatize Low-Performing Ohio Schools Outrageously Hidden in Waiver Request: Editorial
> (https://www.cleveland.com/opinion/2026/06/bid-to-privatize-low-performing-ohio-schools-outrageously-hidden-in-waiver-request-editorial.html)
>
> Published: Jun. 03, 2026, 5:55 a.m.
>
> By Editorial Board, Cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer
>
> "The State of Ohio wants to be excused from certain federal requirements under the nation's main K-12 law and has drafted a federal waiver request to do so.
>
> Fine. The State has a right to ask for waivers it characterizes as intended to provide more flexibility and to save money; up to the federal government to grant or deny.

> But Ohio does not have the right to use that waiver request to hide an odiferous bid to seize low-performing public schools without due process or compensation to the citizens who paid for them and force them to close or transfer assets to private entities."

View the rest of the article at the link above.

As someone interested in the direction that Ohio is taking with its support or not of public education, P-16, I do try to keep up with news and happenings coming out of Columbus. However, as the education policy and practice terrain has shifted over the past 30 years from what scholars would say was a more local center of control over education implementation and practice in public school districts to a broader, even centralized, state-oriented locus of control that is much broader and universal (Fowler, 2004), it is growing ever more difficult to keep up with the important movements being made on behalf of the powerful elite in the Statehouse and beyond.

That means that the investigative reporting done by reporters and editorial boards is even more critical to the public in terms of all of us having a sense of what is happening in education. Many of the people you will meet on the street don't have a clue that the State is spending $1.22 Billion PLUS per year funneling public tax dollars ear-marked for public schools into private education providers through vouchers. Or that this is choking the life out of our public school districts all over Ohio. And it's a fact that efforts like the one reported on above—that is to "hide" movements to takeover supposedly "low performing" schools and districts—are happening and will continue to happen in our state.

The obvious reason for attempts by legislators at seizing control and power from local officials isn't care and concern for students and learning but in funneling the money earmarked for public schools supported mainly by local taxes and governed by elected citizens and local educators and officials into private hands. Privateers running their neoliberal playbook are constantly lobbying politicians to open the doors to more educational opportunities, more dollars, and more profit, and as we know from the ECOT debacle of the last decade (Smith, 2022), more malfeasance and fraud are likely underfoot at every turn. Since those who defrauded citizens out of over $100 million and more in the ECOT ruse, no doubt, face no consequences (except for the challenge of deciding what type of dessert drink to order at noon on their desert island hideaways), these efforts are likely to intensify. There literally is no marshal in Ohio. And it's obvious that no one cares enough to even lament about it out loud in public. Strike that: I lament!

Third, I am overwhelmed by the gall of public officials obsessed with privatizing, demoralizing, and destroying our public institutions, especially our common schools. Many politicians aren't sending their children to public schools (Chen, 2024). Many of them know nothing about how teachers and school leaders do the job of teaching students who face challenges that accrue to those afflicted by forces outside of students' control such as poverty and poor health, among many other factors. My thinking is—especially after learning about all of the ideas in the following clauses in private institutions of higher education that I frequented as a learner and taught in myself (previously mentioned, that I paid for, by the way!):

- That we should commit to making sure that all students get the kind of equitable, high-quality education they deserve no matter what their backgrounds are or zip code is;
- That we should be ramping up our investments in all public school districts, not diminishing them, in order to re-establish our reputation as a top education state serving all students;
- That we should lessen the demands on teachers who are forced to focus on teaching to the test instead of teaching children;
- That we should demand that all new teachers get a good teacher education in a university program and are paid a competitive salary that will help keep them in teaching;
- That we should pull back on the commitments made by public officials to privatize education through voucher schemes and other monetized programs that enrich a few and impoverish us all;
- That we hold everyone who has taken any money from the State in support of any educational setting accountable for reporting student progress and teacher performance and the specific uses of funding through annual audits and reporting schemes, just like all public school districts have to do every year.

Our public officials should be making every effort to make our public school system in Ohio a top 10 public state system again. That slippage isn't due to our students. That slippage has to do with the lack of will of our public officials, and their greed.

Look at the laws (budgets!). Look at the votes. Look at the results.

What's Coming Up Next in This Volume

It is my pleasure to introduce the remaining chapters in the book, all of them authored by doctoral students at Miami University. See the author bios at the end of this volume to learn more about them.

In Chapter 2, "Don't Move the Goalposts," Amanda Robinson and Mathew Hall discuss the arguments used in support of voucher programs, noting that all of them have been disingenuous; the goal posts have been moving since the beginning. The end goal for voucher backers all along has been the demise of public education, but the authors think our public education system has value and is beneficial to all. The public good, they argue, depends on thriving public schools, buoyed by reinvestment and policies that help them thrive.

In Chapter 3, "Give Them an Inch, They'll Take a Mile," Connor J. Goodpaster, and Rashmi Lekamge frame the journey of school choice voucher programs as an incremental long game, with small steps yielding to giant leaps—the latest leap being the EdChoice Voucher Expansion. The public has no access to any information regarding what private schools are doing with public money. Transparency, openness, and continuous audit are hallmarks of public expectations for the use of public funds. But voucher advocates always have profit top of mind, not transparency, which is incontrovertibly anti-democratic.

In Chapter 4, "Render unto Caesar That Which Is Caesar's," Elijah L. Fenwick-Sanders and Anthony W. Rose continue the discussion of private education providers existing in a system that requires no accountability for how public tax dollars are being spent. These providers spend little energy on creating opportunities for those who might benefit from "school choice." It is hard to exercise "choice" when it is difficult, nearly impossible, especially for those already marginalized, to locate providers that could actually help them.

In Chapter 5, "All That Glitters Is Not Gold," Alyssa J. Dezeeuw, Erin Laffrey, and Susan Korea highlight that many of society's most vulnerable children—those identified for special education and other services—have little freedom to exercise school choice since many private education providers are not equipped to provide needed services. When students on IEPs or those who present in the private school setting as needing special services "strain" the private system, they are often turned away and have to return to public schools. Students often do much better there anyway, but the journey and promise of choice rarely manifests as anything other than "fool's gold."

In Chapter 6, "The Tide Is Turning," Ryan C. Kwapniowski and Emma Errgang describe the steps being taken across the State to respond to the State's EdChoice Voucher program embedded in the biennial budget since 2023. More and more energy has been gathering behind the Ohio E&A and its lawsuit, Vouchers Hurt Ohio. Next steps require the cultivation of more public awareness, more democratic engagement, more organizations speaking out, and more support for public education and its ongoing success and well-being.

In Chapter 7, "Don't Throw the Baby Out with the Bathwater," Jessica S. Palatka describes the ongoing threat to Ohio's long-term viability educationally, economically, and politically if we don't take into account the impact that the EdChoice Voucher Expansion program is having and will have on the State "downstream." If we allow this drain of public funding into private hands to go on any longer, there will be negative impacts to our long-term economic health, particularly in terms of workforce development and long-term institutional infrastructure—keys to our future success.

We end the book with my concluding Chapter 8, "The Squeaky Wheel Gets the Grease," and a call to action.

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Chapter 2

Don't Move the Goalposts

Transforming the Common School Promise into a Neoliberal Agenda

By *Amanda Robinson* & *Mathew Hall*

The Common School Promise

How have we transitioned from President Ulysses S. Grant's vision of national unity to a bipartisan, decades-long retreat where presidents from Reagan to Trump have treated schools as corporate takeovers rather than as civic training grounds for democratic citizenship? Reagan's education politics aligned with free market evangelist, Milton Friedman, who was renowned for insisting that parents should have the right to choose their child's educational institution, public or private (Perlstein, 2020; Rubin et al., 2019). Clinton took aim at creating national educational guidelines to oversee state standards with the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (Welner & Chi, 2008). George W. Bush and his edu-business cartel introduced No Child Left Behind to create accountability reform and federal oversight of student performance (Rubin et al., 2019; Welner & Chi, 2008). Obama's Race to the Top initiative was filled with market-oriented strategies including expansion of charter schools along with state and private takeovers (Rubin et al., 2019). Trump's first budget proposal shifted 4 billion dollars from literacy programs for students with disabilities and limited English proficiency, class-size reduction initiatives, and after-school programming to school choice (Black, 2020). And now, we have arrived at a moment where the very existence of our Federal Department of Education is on the chopping block. There has been an incremental and deliberate ideological shift. When privatization masterminds realized they could not openly convince the public to abandon the ideal of the common school, they changed the rules of the game. They began focusing on the language of "school choice" and "vouchers" (Welner et al., 2023), terms designed to sound liberating but engineered to reestablish classism and destroy the fabric of our democracy.

This chapter consists of personal reflections and targeted historical chronicles, combined with blog posts from the Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding (Ohio E&A). The reflection creates a spotlight beyond policy data and grounds our debate in the lived experience of the classroom and K-12 public education. We aim to capture the unique and messy social alchemy of a diverse public school district, trace the political trajectory of this crisis, charting the federal retreat from educational equity, and analyze the current voucher drain occurring in Ohio. We discuss the concern for neoliberal, fascist ideals taking root to abolish our public schools. This chapter ends with a call to action from the frontline defenders of this legacy—our teachers, school administrators, elected officials, and the citizens of Ohio.

The Fighting Owls: A Personal Reflection

We need to anchor ourselves in what the common schools (i.e., public education) provide. My (Amanda) personal reflection is not a sepia-toned craving for nostalgia or sentimental return to easier times but an interrogation of what it actually felt like to grow up within a functionally democratic infrastructure. Mt. Healthy in the 1990s was not a manicured suburban bubble, like surrounding communities of Oak Hills or Wyoming in Cincinnati, Ohio. Comparatively speaking, Mt. Healthy is nothing like socioeconomic enclaves of Upper Arlington in Columbus or Rocky River in Cleveland. Driving down Hamilton Avenue, between Seven Hills and North College Hill, you did not find a monoculture of people or families. Mt. Healthy was a tapestry of socioeconomic and racial diversity. On any given day, the parking lot of Mt. Healthy High School held everything from rusted-out beaters to brand-new Hondas. Based on the oldest state report card data available through the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (ODEW) website, in the 2003-04 school year, Mt. Healthy was 64.7% African-American, 0.6% Asian or Pacific Islander, 1.3% Hispanic, 3.4% multi-racial, and 29.9% White (ODEW, 2004). The percentage of economically disadvantaged students was 49.0%, 0.9% of students had limited English Proficiency, and students with disabilities made up 16.7% of the population.

I attended Mt. Healthy City Schools from kindergarten through high school. My childhood was spent with a stay-at-home mom who served on the PTA, drove carpools, and babysat "teacher kids" in our home. My classrooms were shared by kids from generational working-class families, suburban middle-class households, and families just scraping by. This environment created a rare kind of social alchemy. We didn't just tolerate differences; we collided with them, negotiated them, and synthesized a shared identity as the "Fighting Owls."

My family moved after my graduation. Two of my siblings went to Lakota Local Schools and graduated in the 2000s. Lakota is a massive suburban public school district in Butler County that has transformed over the last 50 years. It split from one high school to two in 1997. The schools are hypercompetitive academically and in extracurriculars, predominantly affluent, and, until recently, racially homogeneous. As the community entered the 2000s, it had the gleam of new money and rapid growth but lacked the deep-rooted, historic community soul that defined Mt. Healthy. My third sibling graduated from Cincinnati Country Day, an elite private school. Where Mt. Healthy was defined by its raw adaptability, Country Day is defined by structure, immense privilege, and a curated network of people and resources. One might say the environment is a place where the rough edges of the real world are carefully sanded off. While my siblings were given incredible tools for specific types of success, my education at Mt. Healthy gave me something money could not buy—an unshakable cultural dexterity.

I realize now how fragile that alchemy was and how under siege it is now. The dramatic expansion of Ohio's EdChoice voucher program feels like a structural undoing of the community that raised me. EdChoice was originally pitched as a life raft for families of underfunded districts similar to Mt. Healthy. However, the near-universal voucher system of today has fundamentally shifted the paradigm. Instead of investing in a public school system that forces a community to invest in each other, the system increasingly subsidizes an exodus. Though my family moved after I graduated from high school and subsequently my siblings changed schools, vouchers now provide a gateway for families to retreat into private, often homogeneous, bubbles.

When public funds are taken from districts like Mt. Healthy to support private school tuition, the loss is both financial and deeply social. Incentivizing families to opt out of their public school system flattens the diversity that makes public schools a microcosm of the real world. Vouchers create an educational marketplace that commodifies school choice at the expense of community solidarity.

School is truly about more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. School is about collaboration, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and communication. In Thurgood Marshall's dissent to the Milliken v. Bradley (1974, as quoted in Black 2020) decision, he says, "for unless our children begin to learn together, there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together" (p. 197). Although Marshall's quote was about the integration of schools, it is pertinent to the discussion of maintaining the sanctity of the common schools, communities of learners, and the future keepers of democracy. If the Mt. Healthy High School Class of 1999 had been fractured by modern voucher policies, I would have been robbed of the peers who taught me my most valuable life lessons. You cannot learn how to navigate a diverse world if the State is legally and financially encouraging people to avoid it.

Moving the Goalposts

In sports, the phrase "moving the goalposts" refers to cheating by changing the location of the goal, ensuring the opposing team can never score. In politics, it is where the criteria for success or an agreement are continuously shifted to prevent the other side from ever "winning." When applied to the history and current state of public education, this idiom unmasks the strategy used by privatization supporters.

When school vouchers were first introduced to the public, the goalposts were set for "emergency rescue" (Welner et al., 2023). Proponents argued that vouchers were necessary, but limited, and designed specifically to help low-income students escape failing urban school districts. However, the goalposts now represent universal entitlement and a siphoning of funds away from the common school system. In Ohio and across the country, those goalposts have not just moved; they have been uprooted entirely. Vouchers are offered to affluent families whose children already attend private schools. The game has been changed from "rescuing the poor" to subsidizing the wealthy and leaving public school districts to foot the bill.

Dismantling the Commons, Piece by Piece

Derek Black's (2020) *Schoolhouse Burning* explores the history of education from our forefathers' ideologies on schooling to recent legislation on issues like school choice and vouchers. The primary objective of the common school, and the original goalposts set forth in the Ohio Constitution, was to create an educated and unified citizenry capable of self-governance. Education was created as a public good. Modern privatization has moved the goalposts to supposedly maximize individual consumer preference and market efficiency (Welner et al., 2023), changing education into a private commodity. This did not occur over night. William Phillis of the Ohio E&A provides an overview of the federal government's slow rollback of public education, which is the result of erosion supported by several presidents and their administrations.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

12.9.2025

For the past 45 years, US Presidents have helped advance the agenda of privatizers of public education.

By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding

/President Reagan's *A Nation at Risk* report was designed to blame public education for a sagging U.S. economy. The Report had no correlation with data gathered by the study committee. Upon receiving the flawed Report, Reagan applauded it because he said it recommended prayer in school and private school vouchers (The Report was silent on both issues.). Three decades earlier, Economist Milton Friedman, in 1954, declared that the government should shed responsibility for education, except for funding vouchers for use at private schools. However, at the 33rd annual meeting of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) in 2006, Friedman essentially said that public education was a mistake and that parents should personally bear the cost of educating their own children.

No president since Jimmy Carter has advocated for public education. Reagan promoted school vouchers. Bush 41 pushed the school voucher agenda. Clinton seemed more interested in charter schools than traditional public schools. Bush 43, in cahoots with congressional leaders from both political parties, cobbled together the disastrous No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation that, whether intentional or not, took the joy out of learning. Obama, with Arne Duncan in the U.S. Department of Education pushing the Every Student Succeeds Act and the Race to the Top project, in many respects, put NCLB on steroids in terms of tarnishing the image of public education. The Biden administration did not particularly champion public schools. Trump is on record as an opponent of public education.

Public education has been maligned by the highest office in the land for nearly five decades, and education privatizers have successfully milked the public treasury of most states and the federal government to nourish private schools and privately-operated charter schools.

Private schools and privately-operated charter schools are thriving on tax funds to the detriment of the public common school system required by the Constitutions of each of the 50 states.

What is the end game of the education privatizers? Their goal is the elimination of the public common school system, except for a placement for the extremely disadvantaged students and those with disabilities.

The EdChoice voucher litigation has a dual purpose: end the EdChoice voucher scheme and restore public education to its rightful place of sustaining democracy. The entire public education community needs to help with this effort!

This debate is not limited to presidential legislation. Betsy DeVos, former U.S. Secretary of Education, set her sights on large-scale expansion of voucher programs at the federal level (Berends, 2021; Black, 2020; Hess, 2020). The current executive branch has taken additional steps to weaken our public schools as they attempt to remove the U.S. Department of Education. Mr. Phillis provides an overview of Lindsey Burke's press release regarding federal changes.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

12.1.2025

Lindsey Burke-Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy and Programs, US Department of Education
By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding

The US Department of Education was established by Congress in 1979 to support the public common school system (vouchers and charters were not in the picture at that date).

In 2025 the US Department of Education is being dismantled by the Administration with or without congressional approval.

So, what is the motivation for trashing the US Department of Education? A US Department of Education press release issued June 6, 2025, announcing Lindsey Burke's appointment states the following:

> The U.S. Department of Education today announced additional appointees who will work to carry out President Trump and Secretary McMahon's vision for making American education the best in the world.
>
> Lindsey Burke, Ph.D. – Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy and Programs
>
> Lindsey Burke spent the last 17 years at the Heritage Foundation, where she was most recently Director of the Center for Education Policy and the Mark A. Kolokotrones Fellow in Education. As such, she oversaw Heritage's preschool, K-12, and higher education policy and research.
>
> Lindsey's scholarly research has been published in peer-reviewed journals such as *Social Science Quarterly* and *Educational Research and Evaluation*, and she has published hundreds of policy reports on a range of education issues and testified before Congress on numerous occasions. In 2021, Lindsey was tapped to join Governor-elect Glenn Youngkin's transition steering committee and was appointed to serve on the Youngkin landing team for education. She was also appointed by Governor Youngkin to serve on the Board of Visitors for George Mason

> University. Lindsey has served as a fellow at EdChoice, the namesake foundation of Milton and Rose Friedman, on the national advisory board of Learn4Life, a network of public charter schools serving opportunity youth, on the board of the Educational Freedom Institute, on the advisory board of the Independent Women's Forum's Education Freedom Center, and on the advisory board of the University of Austin's Center for Education and Public Service. She holds a bachelor's degree in Politics from Hollins University in Roanoke, VA, a master of teaching degree in Foreign Language Education from the University of Virginia, and a Ph.D in Education Policy from George Mason University.

A recent ProPublica article included quotes about public education from Ms. Burke:

> Lindsey Burke, with The Heritage Foundation: "I'm optimistic that, you know, five years from now a majority of kids are going to be in a private school choice program." She also said in a podcast, "We're going to have a lot of empty school buildings."

The "fox guarding the henhouse" comes to mind.

Those in charge of the US Department of Education are in the process of dismantling it. Those who advocate for the preservation of the public common school should challenge the public officials who are allied with the public school privatizers.

We seem to be living in an era where we are constantly reminded that our democracy is under siege. We can look for threats in the usual, loud places of political rhetoric, polarized electorates, and the slow erosion of institutional norms, but the most dangerous assault on American democracy is not happening in a televised hearing or on a debate stage; it is happening quietly, systemically, and locally in the Ohio statehouse. The strategy is simple: Move the goalposts until the game itself is unplayable. If you play a game where the rules are rewritten every time you make progress, you stop playing. That is the ultimate danger of this tactical shift.

For nearly two centuries, the foundational premise of American civic life has been that public education is a non-negotiable public good (Black, 2020). It was never intended as a private luxury or a consumer commodity but was designed to be a part of the fabric of our democratic society. Yet, a political project aims to dismantle this infrastructure, shifting the goalposts of educational purpose from instilling collective democratic values to hyper-individualized market consumerism. To understand how far the goalposts have been moved, we have to look back to the promises made by our forefathers. Privatization advocates use the language of "original intent" and "founding principles," but history reveals an entirely different originalism—one that viewed the common school as the shield against tyranny and inequality. Thomas Jefferson said public education is "necessary to prepare citizens to participate effectively and intelligently in our open political system [and] preserve freedom and independence" (Black, 2020, p. 14). John Adams insisted that public education was the duty of the public, should be maintained by the public, and that "no expense … would be too extravagant (Black, 2020, p. 57).

The education debate began with the founding of our country and has been woven into historical events. As part of reconstruction after the Civil War, states were required to include the right of education as part of their individual state constitutions (Black, 2020). In 1851, delegates gathered to rewrite Ohio's state constitution. They were not drafting policy for an elite few but were building the blueprint for a modern, egalitarian society. Out of that convention came Article IV, Section 2, which explicitly mandated that the General Assembly secure a "thorough and efficient system of common schools throughout the State" (OH Const. art. VI, § 2). The word "common" did not mean cheap or low-quality; it meant shared (Black, 2020)—that the child of a wealthy landowner or the child of an immigrant laborer would sit side-by-side, learning the shared language of citizenship and democracy. From 1851 through the mid-20th century, Ohio fought to expand and protect that promise. Additionally, following the Civil War, President Ulysses S. Grant recognized that the war-torn republic could only heal and defend itself against future insurrections if it established a federally-protected and robust system of public education (Baker & Hinojosa, 2023; Black, 2020). For Grant and the Radical Republicans of Reconstruction, the common school was a democratic weapon.

If we continue to let the goalposts be moved, we may one day find that the playing field of democracy has vanished. The public school system is being forced to play a rigged game where schools are starved of resources but expected to achieve superior metrics. To defend the republic, we must defend the common school. This chapter is an invitation to stop the retreat, reclaim our history and democratic values, and stand our ground for the public good.

Vouchers in the Vortex of State Power

Tension exists between the language of Ohio's constitution as it lays out the duty of the State to fund a common school and the displacement of opportunity created by the advocates of school vouchers. The public, common school and the publicly funded voucher system, thus, exist in a constant state of tension with each other. As Mr. Phillis says in the blog below, attacks on the common school are attacks on democracy. The voucher system, as a political project, is an intentional choice to devalue and unsettle democratic norms. We have to, at the root, consider the nature of power as wielded by the State and its agents.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

9.23.2025

Public Schools, private schools, and the Civil War
By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding

Public education advocates point to the interdependence of the public common school system and democracy. The concern is that, if the common system is abolished or greatly diminished, democracy will become ineffective, thrusting our social order into isolation, detachment, and segregation.

Prior to the Civil War, the northern states had established the common school system or were in the process of doing so. The southern states typically were not developing a common school system.

Some leaders in education during the mid to late 19th century suggested that the lack of a common school system in the South fueled the launch of the Civil War.

In the 11th Annual Report of the State Commissioner of Common Schools to the Governor of the State of Ohio for the school year ending August 31, 1864, State Commissioner E.E. White contrasted education in the North and South: "The smoke of the first onset having cleared away, the fact was manifest that the line between open loyalty and active treason was the common school line" (p. 63). In the 12th annual report, State Commissioner White wrote, "What human agency but universal education can heal the ravages of the dreadful conflict and be to newborn liberty its abiding strength and shield? The one imperative necessity of the American Republic is, that the common school will be planted upon every square mile of its peopled territory, and that the instruction imparted therein be carried to the highest point of efficiency" (p. 5).

State Commissioner J.A. Norris on page 5 of the 13th Annual Report stated: "The confidence of the people in each other has been most dangerously shaken and the fact is generally recognized that common schools are among the most efficient instrumentalities to restore their confidence." Further, Norris, on Page 6, said, "In the organization of American states no maxim of civil policy has been more clearly recognized and universally applied than that civil and religious liberty cannot be mandated in the absence of universal intelligence and morality in the body politic and that to secure these ends, 'thorough and efficient system of common schools' must be sustained, at public expense, and under state regulations. This is no longer a debatable question but is a settled principle of public policy." In North Carolina Calvin H. Wiley, the first Superintendent of Common Schools in the mid-19th century, argued that the South's lack of a robust public school system contributed to sectionalism and ultimately helped to fuel the Civil War.

Wiley believed that, without the common school system to instill civic values, the South became susceptible to radical ideologies and disunion. He lamented the South's failure to invest in public education, noting that this weakened the region's social fabric and made it easier for secessionist sentiment to take root.

Wiley discussed public education as a nationalizing force that would bind diverse communities together through common knowledge and Democratic principles.

President Grant was an adamant supporter of public education and opposed the use of tax money for private schools of any kind. In the fall of 1875, in a speech in Des Moines, Iowa, on September 29, 1875, Grant extolled the virtues of the common school. He said, "Let us all labor to add all needful guarantees for the more perfect security of free thought, free speech, a free press, pure morals, unfettered religious sentiment, and equal rights and privileges to all men, irrespective of nationality, color, or religion. Encourage free schools and resolve that not one dollar of money shall be appropriated to the support of any sectarian school. Resolve that neither the State or the nation, or both combined, shall support institutions of learning other than those sufficient to afford every child growing up in the land the opportunity of a good common school education unmixed with sectarian, pagan, or atheistical tenants. Leave matters of religion to the family altar, the church, and the private school supported entirely by private contribution. Keep the church and the State forever separate."

In 1875 Congressman James G. Blaine proposed a federal constitutional amendment to bar government aid to sectarian institutions. The amendment passed in the House, but failed in the Senate. The amendment, in part, read, "No State shall make any law respecting the establishing of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; and no money raised by taxation in any state, for the support of public schools, or derived from any public fund thereof, not any public lands devoted thereto shall ever be under the control of any religious sect nor shall any money so raised or lands so devoted be divided between religious sects or denominations. (Congressional Record, 44th Congress, first session 14 December 1875). (The Ohio Constitution adopted 24 years earlier had a very similar provision.)

The Blaine amendment passed overwhelmingly in the House (180 to 7); however, it did not receive the necessary two-thirds vote in the Senate. Subsequently the essence of the language of the Blaine amendment was incorporated in 37 state constitutions.

Those who believe this amendment was motivated by an anti-Catholic bias should consider that the Blaine proposal was an expression of a need to prop up support for the public common school open to all youth. By that time in American history, the public common school had demonstrated that it had the potential of healing the nation subsequent to the Civil War.

The Blaine Amendment did not single out the Catholic parochial schools for ineligibility for public tax support; the concept applied to all religious groups. Religious leaders played the victim card, suggesting the failed federal amendment and subsequent successful state amendments were rooted in anti-Catholicism. The Catholic leadership was successful in playing that card. Many folks became convinced that the Blaine amendment was rooted in anti-Catholic bias. The fact is that the Blaine amendments were rooted in the belief that a robust common school system is necessary to nurture democracy; that it is essential to a unified nation. The public common school system helped heal the wounds of war as well as educate the citizens.

State and national political leaders have taken a wrong turn by giving tax support to private schools, while neglecting the public common school system.

The nation needs a robust public school system to bring the citizens of this nation together. It is time for healing. It is time for politicians to bring people together instead of separating them. The common school has the capacity to do just that!

We have reached a tipping point; it is an appropriate moment to deploy a critical theoretical approach in our understanding of how vouchers impact education. The specific nature of school vouchers is, as noted throughout this chapter, a crafty mechanism by which privatization advocates can further marginalize the neediest students and most vulnerable families under the guise of help. Not only does the Ohio Constitution expressly prohibit a publicly funded voucher system for private schools, but it is most often students, parents, and families with the most resources who make use of vouchers to attend private schools.

The voucher system is a single-prong among many in support of a neoliberal, fascist assault on public education. As Randi Weingarten (2025), President of the American Federation of Teachers, notes, the founding fathers believed public education to be a "bulwark against political tyranny" (para. 4). Many political scientists have noted that authoritarians fear a well-educated citizenry, and the voucher system is a weapon used by neoliberal fascists to impoverish schools. Students who may otherwise grow up to be vocal critics of a government's worst excesses and impulses are hampered with barriers that are intentional attempts to silence opposition.

The Franklin County ruling of Judge Jaiza Page from June 2025 clarified that vouchers, despite their unconstitutionality, have flourished and been made possible by state mechanisms of power. How can, simultaneously, a ruling that proscribes their unconstitutionality exist within the same system that has allowed vouchers to persist? From a Foucauldian perspective, the push for school vouchers is both a dispute about policy and funding and a struggle about how power circulates through institutions, populations, and forms of knowledge.

A central theme to the voucher debate is the concept of "school choice." As Foucault (1980) would acknowledge, societies produce "regimes of truth" that are accepted as common sense, and by situating "school choice" into a discourse about freedom, consumer empowerment, parental rights, and innovation, advocates are constructing a reality in which vouchers are normalized as a form of sense (p. 81). These regimes of truth, into which school vouchers are being shoe-horned, are useful means by which to create oppositional sides that suggest that anyone who disagrees with vouchers opposes freedom. The reliance on this anti-freedom discourse creates a distraction that obscures the fact that detractors are asking questions about the inequality, public responsibility, and resource distribution associated with the voucher system.

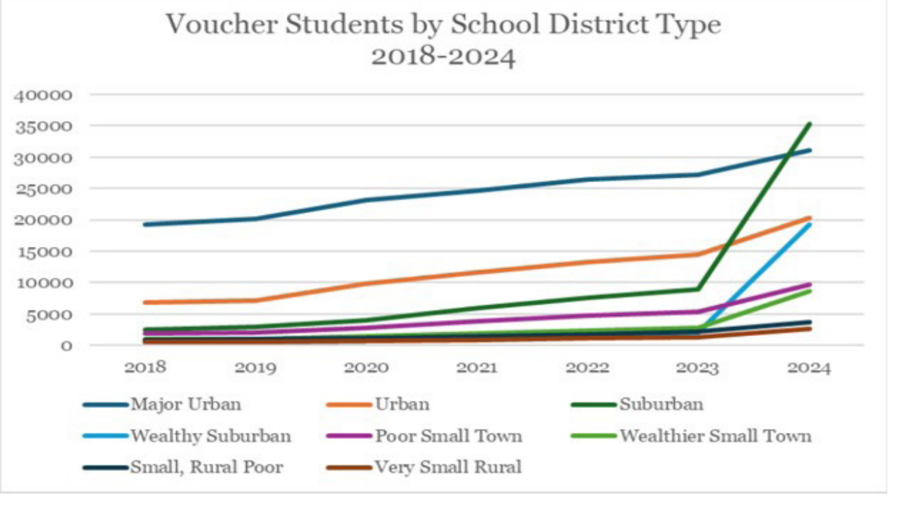
Extrapolating from and mapping the concepts laid out by Foucault directly onto the present reality of school vouchers, we see the effects of normalization within regimes of truth.

> The move over the past ten years to normalize voucher and charter schools, while desensitizing the public to the complementary issues of economic and racial segregation, has resulted in a form of public schools that looks less like an experiment in democratic preparation and more like a system of social and economic reproduction. (Weiner, 2022, p. 62)

In a state as gerrymandered as Ohio, where vouchers are deeply unpopular but are not put to the vote, we can see the hand of an authoritarian government. If we marry the work of Foucault and Wiener, it is easy to understand why vouchers can facilitate a slippery slide into neoliberal fascist ideology. By turning education, a public good, into a private, marketized good, advocates of vouchers and charter schools have used commodification to make Ohioans compete for the individual rewards of education rather than investing in the greater good of all citizens.

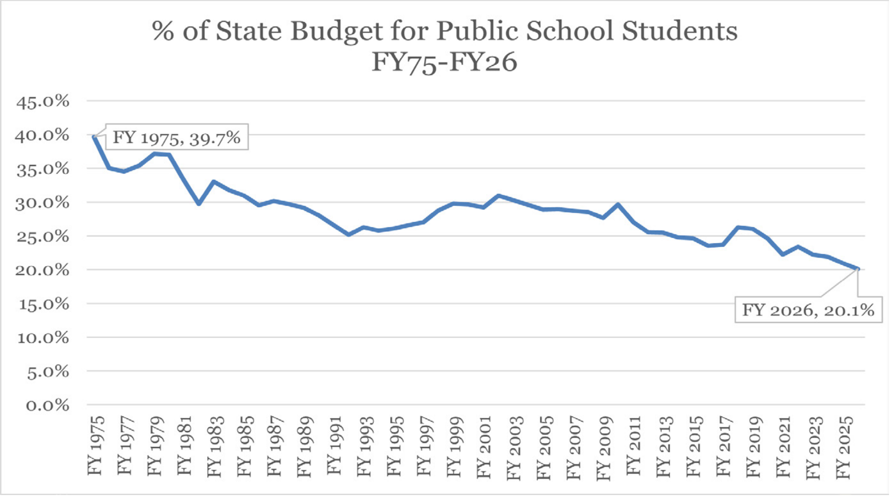
Furthermore, because this form of educational system puts its "consumer base" into competition with other members of the community, it becomes a battle of haves and have nots. The majority of Ohio's voucher users have the means to pay for private school and have never sent their children to public schools, which diverts public funds towards the most-resourced individuals in the State and impoverishes the schools that serve those with the least resources. Morris (2024) points to the chart below (Figure 1) from former State Representative Stephen Dyer, which shows the increase in voucher usage based on ODEW data. (Note: Categories like "wealthy suburban" or "small, rural poor" are assigned to Ohio school districts by ODEW.)

Figure 1
Voucher Students by School District Type 2018-2024



Further, in Figure 2, we can see that, as more resourced school districts receive an uptick in voucher funding, there is a corresponding decline in overall state apportionment for public schools since 1975. Just a cursory examination of the data from former Rep. Dyer shows that Ohio paid some of the privatized schools more than double what the largest public institutions in the State were receiving.

Figure 2
Percentage of State Budget for Public Schools FY75-FY26



Additional data provided by former Rep. Dyer (2026), shows the ways that wealthier districts of all sizes absorb higher numbers of voucher dollars. The data show that there are 26 school districts in Ohio, many of them among the State's wealthiest, where 75% (or more) of public funding is being given to private schools rather than the public schools for which the funds were originally earmarked.

This is an intentional political project rather than an unforeseen circumstance of shifting policy change. While percentages of public funds being given to private schools within the voucher system increase, the overall investment in public education is simultaneously being strangled. The graphics illustrate that the wealthiest communities are receiving voucher-infusions at a disproportionate rate compared to their less resourced peers. If vouchers are meant to lift people into greater academic opportunity, why is it that the communities for which vouchers were theoretically created are not receiving the same boon as peers around the State of Ohio? We contend that this is an intentional funneling of state resources into a political project that is demonstrably moving voucher recipients towards a socio-political homogeneity.

Using a Foucauldian lens, we see that vouchers and charter schools are the backbone of a neoliberal fascist education. While it seems like vouchers, through the concept of "school choice," are engaged in consensus building and individual freedom, they are actually part of a brazen manipulation of state power that lacks the consent of a statewide voting base. Because school vouchers and charter schools are deeply entrenched in a capitalist system that rewards those with the most access to information, transportation, and social capital, they disenfranchise those without these assets. The inevitable result of this market-driven approach to education is segregation based on socioeconomic-status, race, ability, LGBTQ+ status, religious faith, etc. It might be dressed up in the language of choice, but it is segregation all the same.

Magness and Suprenant (2019) argue that the privatization of schooling has turned families into consumers and customers, and normalizing this market-driven approach creates a need for additional voucher and charter school systems. Embedded within this expansion, however, is the ethical quagmire created by the schools when they produce systems of segregation based on socio-economic and racial factors (p. 412). Magness and Suprenant trace this voucher-based segregation as a means of evading the requirement that schools desegregate in the years after Brown v. Board of Education. A thorough analysis of scholarly literature about vouchers and charter schools shows that schools, while insisting that families are the consumers with choice, are the ones who are able to reject students and families. We have seen that the list of disqualifiers is vast. Vouchers are sold as opportunity for the disenfranchised but are exclusionary.

By creating an exclusionary educational ecosystem, the State and its actors are able to separate populations into the freedom-loving, school choice wing and the divisive and untrustworthy "other." This is, simply put, a fascist logic. Because it reinforces dominant social, cultural, political, and religious narratives (regimes of truth), the voucher and charter system dominates the conversation around social norms and universally accepted truths that Foucault warns about in his discussion of power and is able to expel from its ranks those not deemed worthy or in line with these norms. Since this happens with the illusion of consent, it does not feel like the dangerous transformation that it certainly would be if said transformation was a product of coercion. As such, people may not openly identify with fascist principles or as a fascist, but they have embraced a neoliberal fascist ideology that uplifts and amplifies the goals of an authoritarian state.

Henry Giroux, one of America's preeminent scholars in critical pedagogy, would likely make the point that the erosion and degradation of the democratic state and its apparatuses is the goal. By painting schools, endowed though they might be with the confidence and funding of Ohio's constitution, as inefficient or as laboratories for liberal indoctrination, the voucher advocates sew distrust into this bedrock of democratic skill-building. The voucher camp is, thus, able to convince people (the illusion of consent, yet again!) that public dollars should be diverted to private and charter schools via vouchers. When there is neither accountability for the expenditure of public funds nor for the curricular efficacy of schools within the voucher system, there is no mechanism by which Ohioans can provide oversight to the voucher program nor understand its effects. The State has legitimized privatization and deregulation without considering the costs in a long-term play for the dismantling of public institutions and infrastructures that are the bedrock of democracy. "The result is that neoliberal ideology increasingly resembles a call to war that turns the principles of democracy against democracy itself" (Giroux, 2015, p. 14).

Standing Up to the Coup

Mr. Phillis's blog from May 26, 2026, notes that public education has been at risk for a number of years. Going back to the Reagan administration, we can see how educational reformers have positioned public schools as unable to manage their own affairs and resources. The systemic distrust of public institutions is not new, and we need to consider the historical nature of this erosion to counteract it.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

5.26.2026

Indianapolis School District is now privatized. Other large cities throughout the State of Ohio and the Nation school take close heed
By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding

A recent blog by Nigel Long outlined the 20-year plan to privatize the Indianapolis school district. School districts, nearly all of which are operated by elected boards of education, have been targeted for extinction by some groups for at least the past half-century.

Subsequent to President Reagan's bogus Nation at Risk report, misguided education reformers floated the idea that the problem could be laid at the feet of teachers' unions, inept teachers, bloated administration, and even the elected schools boards. Authors John Chubb and Terry Moe, in their book, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, published in the early 1990s, proffered that school boards are incapable of advancing reform efforts because they operate through democratic management processes. Of course, Chubb and Moe had no real comprehension as to how public schools could better serve students. They were looking for a scapegoat to blame for the perception that public schools were failing.

In the mid-1990s, David C. Berliner and Bruce Biddle published *The Manufactured Crisis*, which debunked the notion that public schools were in crisis. However, since the 1990s, the American public has been fed a steady diet that public education is generally failing and that it must be privatized. In some cases, the privatizers promote school vouchers. In other cases, they promote privatization of entire districts. Indianapolis is a recent example of the private takeover of the entire school district.

Ohio's constitution, as written and interpreted by courts, has long held that the State is required to maintain its investment in a thorough and efficient common school system. In Ohio, like many other states, the voucher system remains deeply unpopular, and critics of vouchers argue that the diversion of public funds to private and religious schools undermines the very spirit of the constitutional obligation described above. By redirecting public resources away from public education, the public good is undermined. Vouchers weaken the State's commitment to equitable, democratically governed public education and contribute to increasing educational stratification and segregation based on socio-economic status, identity, geography, and access.

This chapter has provided a personal reflection on the promise of public schools as well as drawn on the works of scholars past and present to describe the ways in which vouchers can be understood as part of a broader neoliberal project that redefines education as a private commodity rather than a right or public good. Market competition and a system of haves and have-nots replaces the democratic accountability at the heart of Ohio's constitution. Families are positioned as consumers in competition with each other, and public institutions are fundamentally weakened in favor of privatized and unregulated alternatives that are often exclusionary in nature. The alleged reforms of the voucher system ultimately erode the democratic laboratory of the public school by diminishing their role in civil responsibility and reducing Ohio's opportunity for collective engagement. Concentrating educational power in private hands rather than publicly accountable institutions contributes to the explosion of neoliberal fascist education in Ohio—one for which the Ohio constitution was not written to support.

Protecting education as a public good requires renewed investment in public schools, equitable funding structures, democratic governance, and policies that strengthen the common school system. This is our collective call to action! We must advocate for schools that serve all students, not merely those with the resources to navigate education markets. A thriving democracy depends on robust public institutions, and safeguarding public education is essential to ensuring that future generations have access to the knowledge, critical consciousness, and civic skills necessary for a democratic life.

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Chapter 3

Give Them an Inch and They Will Take a Mile

The Expansion of School Choice and Privatization of Schooling in Ohio

By *Connor J. Goodpaster* & *Rashmika Lekamge*

The framers of the Ohio constitution could never have anticipated the collection of religious organizations, private investors, and interest groups that would be clamoring for a portion of Ohio's education funding today. The Ohio legislature gave those interest groups an inch in the mid to late 1990s with the creation of the Cleveland Scholarship program and the creation of the State's charter school program. Since then, this inch given by the State legislature has been stretched into many miles of legislation. This legislation has opened the window to more public money flowing out of Ohio's tax system and into the pockets of private entities that are not subject to any of the disclosure requirements of the common school system.

Article VI of the Ohio Constitution provides a mandate for the creation of one "thorough and efficient system of common schools" (OH Const. art. VI, § 2). This same article also creates a specific restriction in which "no religious or other sect, or sects, shall ever have any exclusive right to, or control of, any part of the school funds of this state" (OH Const. art. VI, § 2). This section of the constitution does not restrict religious institutions or other sects from providing educational services; they just cannot have access to the State's education funds. This creates an immediate problem for the EdChoice and EdChoice expansion voucher programs.

Ohio's EdChoice and EdChoice expansion voucher systems do not restrict public voucher funds from going toward tuition at private, ideology-based schools. In fact, each of the 100 highest paid EdChoice and EdChoice expansion voucher receiving schools are private religious schools. These schools combined to receive $248 million in taxpayer funds during the 2023-2024 school year (Millard, 2025). That is $248 million worth of Ohio income and sales tax funds that are flowing away from the common school system and into private entities that the State constitution explicitly restricts from accessing public education funds.

In this chapter, we will explore how voucher and school choice proponents have taken that inch that the State legislature gave them and how they continue to push and run with this momentum until they are miles down the road with hundreds of millions in taxpayer dollars. We begin with an Ohio E&A blog post and a personal essay that provides an account of the financial and educational consequences of for-profit education. We then present a research essay that outlines how an original narrow exception to state law was turned into a booming for-profit educational industry while weakening the constitutionally backed common school system that the majority of Ohio families rely on. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion that synthesizes the themes found in both the personal and research essays.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

12.9.2025

Former U.S. Secretary of Education Bill Bennett (1985-1988) and Accel for-profit charter school operator Ron Packard team-up again.
By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

Bill Bennett, U.S. Secretary of Education (1985-1988) has bounced around in U.S. government and visible private enterprise positions for several decades. After his stint with the U.S. Department of Education, he was founding chairman of K-12, Inc. (now Stride) online charter school company. Ron Packard operated K-12, Inc. several years ago at an annual salary of $5 million. Packard left K-12, Inc. to start the Accel charter school business, which has a heavy footprint in Ohio. Bennett and Packard have reconnected in Ohio territory. Accel charter school has announced that Bennett has been engaged to serve as Founding Provost of a new chain of online Classical Academies. Bennett will also serve as provost to a brick-and-mortar school in Toledo, Ohio, and one in West Virginia. The details of the Bennett/Packard duo are provided in Diane Ravitch's July 31, 2025, blog attached. My first encounter with Bennett was in a national meeting, wherein he was booed during a presentation while serving as U.S. Secretary of Education. He regained control of the meeting by merely saying, "This audience is above that kind of behavior." Later in life Bennett was chatting with a group of parents in Columbus interested in online charter schooling for their kids. Out of curiosity, I crashed his party. His rhetoric at that time was that, as Secretary of Education, he had visited a lot of public schools and found that most of them were drug-ridden, nasty environments and that folks should shelter their students by an online charter school experience "in the loving environment of their own home." I asked a question, which he ignored.

***This blog post included an article by Diane Ravitch in which she outlines the history of Bill Bennett and Ron Packard's partnerships.

I Stole a Chair: A Personal Essay on the Financial Conditions of School Choice

I (Connor) spent the 2020-2021 school year as a 4th and 5th grade teacher in a public charter school much like the ones that are described in William Phillis' blog post above. While the specific school I worked for was not a voucher supported school, the funding scheme used by the State of Ohio to fund tuition free public charters is similar to the funding scheme used for Ohio's EdChoice voucher program. Both programs arose in the 1990s and both are rooted in the same ideological school privatization movement.

My first day at the school was August 3rd, 2020. I had about two weeks to get familiar with the school, go through the beginning of the year professional development, and have a classroom ready for the first day with students. This was during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we were one of the few schools in the State that opened the school year offering families the option to send their students to school fully in-person, fully online, or in a hybrid modality. The school could not afford to hire one teacher for each modality in each grade level, so their solution was to combine grade levels and split the classes based on learning modality. Each combined grade level was assigned two teachers—one to lead the fully in-person class and the other to lead both the hybrid and virtual classes.

I was assigned to lead the 4th and 5th grade hybrid and virtual classes, providing direct instruction for language arts and math. Science and social studies were not taught by teachers but were taught through a fully automated online curriculum. While the grade levels were combined into one classroom, instruction was split. I had to provide separate direct instruction in each subject for each grade. There were simply not enough hours in the school day to further divide my direct instruction time so that each modality could have their own lessons. We could not add more hours to the school day, so the school's solution was to require all direct instruction in hybrid classrooms to be done online. This decision effectively eliminated the instructional benefits that hybrid students would gain from physically coming to the school building. Instead of being in a room with me for instructional periods, hybrid students were made to sit in my classroom and watch me provide direct instruction on a Zoom meeting while I conducted the meeting from a separate classroom. This resulted in the hybrid students only being in the same physical classroom as me for four hours total each week.

I needed some specific supplies to make this set-up work. I needed a computer, a projector, a whiteboard, and a good webcam so that students could read what was written on the board. I also needed classic classroom supplies to try to squeeze as much learning as I could into my limited in-person time with my hybrid students. The school supplied me with a computer but would not purchase any of the other supplies. I was told that there was no room in the budget for them and that I would need to either use an online fundraising platform to raise money for the supplies or I would need to rely on a local non-profit that provided supplies to teachers free of charge.

There was a designated day for each school in the area to go shopping for supplies at the non-profit. Since this was during the pandemic, we had to sign up for specific shopping time slots so that folks could properly socially distance themselves. I showed up during my assigned slot and grabbed the closest parking spot I could find. I was able to get some writing utensils, art supplies, some classroom decorations, some fun activities, and even some science textbooks that aligned with the State standards so that I could attempt to do some level of science instruction when I could squeeze it in. Unfortunately, they did not have the whiteboard, web camera, or projector that I needed.

As I walked out of the non-profit, I found a worker standing next to my four-door silver hatchback with a large box. We made eye contact, and I nodded to him as I walked toward the car.

He smiled and said, “Does your rear seat fold down? I don’t think this will fit unless you take the car seat out and fold the rear seat.”

Having no clue what was going on, I asked, “What’s in the box?”

“Your new desk chair,” he said.

I’m sure I looked confused at that moment. I did not ask for a desk chair, but I also was not going to turn one down. I have had back issues for years, and the school only provided me with one of the hard plastic desk chairs that the students used. Whatever was in that box was certainly going to be better than my current setup.

I removed my son’s car seat, folded the back seat down, helped him load the box, wedged the unattached car seat into the cargo area, and went on my merry way. I could not get everything I needed, but at least I walked out with a sweet chair!

The following Monday I got to school early so that I would have time to set up the chair before I needed to be in my first professional development session. I also used that time to set up a fundraising page for the supplies I was not able to get at the non-profit. Shortly after sharing the fundraiser on my social media, I received a text message from my Dad. My Dad has never been one to sugar coat his thoughts when he senses an injustice. His first message read:

“What the hell do you mean they won’t get you a white board? What the hell are they using my tax dollars for?”

"Honestly, that's a great question" I replied.

"Take the fundraiser down and send me the links to the stuff you need. I'll get you whatever that cheap school won't."

He ended up buying a $100 whiteboard on wheels and a $50 projector for my class. I thanked him and went back to preparing for the day.

I was doing some quick lesson planning when the intervention specialist came into the room to chat. He immediately noticed my new chair.

"How did you manage to get the school to buy you a chair?" He asked.

"I didn't. They gave it to me at that classroom shopping event yesterday," I said.

"They didn't have free chairs there yesterday. They had a few chairs for people who won a contest. It was one of those 'like, share, and comment' things. Did you win it?" He asked.

I hadn't won any contest. I just happened to park in the area that was designated for the context winners. It wasn't marked, so I had no way of knowing. The guy who loaded it into my car did not ask me my name or do anything to check my identity. Turns out, I had stolen the chair from someone else who had won the contest.

The point of telling this story is not that I accidentally stole a chair from a non-profit. The point is that I was teaching at a publicly funded school that could not provide the basic supplies that were necessary for a class to run. Forget the chair. They could not even supply a projector in a school that relied almost entirely on computer-based resources. They could not supply a whiteboard to work on, any sort of supplemental science or social studies materials, or even grade level books for students to read. It's no secret that traditional public school teachers statewide also have to raise their own funds or rely on non-profits for classroom supplies or spend their own money. This problem is not unique to the public-charter or voucher supported school environments.

While the problem may not be unique to the private school environment, it is exacerbated by both the funding models the State uses and the neoliberal ideologies that drive these policies. As the name suggests, for-profit schools have to earn a profit. There is a portion of the State provided taxpayer money that has to be siphoned off to demonstrate a profit, to pay executive salaries, and to pay dividends to investors. These education providers have a primary fidelity to profit, not to taxpayers who fund them, not to the faculty and staff that make them run, and certainly not to the students they are meant to educate.

The school in which I worked did not participate in the EdChoice voucher program, but it operated within a policy framework in which public funds are given to alternative private educational providers. The State of Ohio funds charter schools through the Ohio Department of Education, which in turn is funded by Ohio taxpayers through the State's income and sales taxes. The per-pupil amount given to charter schools varies based on a number of factors, but on average charter schools receive a base per-pupil allocation of $8,241.61 from Ohio's income and sales tax funds (Ohio Department of Education & Workforce [ODEW], 2026a). The State of Ohio spent $1.47 Billion on charter schools through their base funding scheme in 2026 as of 6/12/2026 (ODEW, 2026b). Charter schools also have access to additional funding through other state programs for facilities, transportation, disadvantaged students, and through grants from the federal government and non-profits.

The major difference between charter funding and the EdChoice voucher system is that the per-pupil amount distributed for a voucher is dependent on income. Families with household incomes below 450% of the federal poverty level are granted the maximum voucher amount of $6,166 per student for K-8 or $8,408 per student for grades 9-12 (EdChoice, 2025). Families of four with a household income less than or equal to $144,675 qualified for a maximum voucher in 2025 (ODEW, 2025). EdChoice vouchers are funded through the same revenue stream as the charter program. The funds come from the Ohio Department of Education, which is funded through state income and sales taxes.

For comparison, traditional public schools also received a base allocation from the State, and they are also able to levy additional funding through local property and income taxes. The average traditional school district in Ohio spent $12,759 total per-pupil in the 2024-2025 school year, $8,568 of that per-pupil number was specifically spent on classroom instruction (Millard, 2026). The specific per-pupil amount spent in each district will vary based upon their community's willingness to provide additional tax funding. The problem may not be unique to the privatized school environment, but it is exacerbated by the unique pressures present in the for-profit environment.

Research Essay: Tracing the Evolution of School Choice

The history of school voucher programs in the United States can be understood through the familiar idiom, "Give them an inch and they'll take a mile." Programs initially presented as narrow exceptions, targeted to specific cities, low-income families, or struggling schools, have repeatedly expanded beyond their original scope. Over time, eligibility widens, participation becomes normalized, and increasing amounts of public funding are directed toward private educational institutions. This pattern is not accidental but reflects a cumulative process of policy expansion documented throughout the school choice literature (Carpenter & Kafer, 2012).

This pattern is visible across multiple layers. Nationally, voucher policy has evolved from early colonial forms into modern statewide programs and then towards universalized schemes (Carpenter & Kafer, 2012). It is visible in states like Wisconsin, Indiana, Louisiana, and North Carolina, each demonstrating how a narrow program was initiated and then became a platform for expansion (Sude & Wolf, 2021). When considering the situation in Ohio, where the Cleveland Scholarship Program became the opening "inch" from which a series of larger expansions followed until the policy expansion reached near-universal voucher eligibility, Ohio provides a particularly clear example of this process. The State's voucher system evolved from the geographically limited Cleveland Scholarship Program in 1995 to near-universal eligibility under the modern EdChoice system.

William Phillis interprets this pattern as evidence that voucher programs are designed to facilitate long-term privatization. While this argument is not isolated, the existing body of research inclines towards voucher expansion as incremental policy change towards privatization (Sutton & King, 2013). Phillis also stresses that the actual distributional consequences are unequal. Private schools generally do not recruit disadvantaged or disabled children at scale, which clearly emphasizes that the public system remains responsible for the most expensive educational responsibilities while losing funds (Carlson & Cowen, 2015; Gooden et al., 2016).

Accordingly, the central argument of this research essay is that the "inch" of limited voucher policy was designed, or at minimum functioned, as a Trojan horse for the "mile" of broad privatization. In Ohio, that mile arrived in the form of universal vouchers; nationally and across states, the same pattern can be seen.

Through the National Frame: Colonial Era Vouchers to Universal Program

Vouchers have a long history in the United States. However, the policy implications have shifted from the initial intentions. Evidence from private school choice programs shows that voucher-like arrangements date to the colonial era, but modern school choice expanded through a series of legislative and judicial adjustments that made increasingly broad programs constitutionally and politically viable (Carpenter & Kafer, 2012). The review finds that the philosophical justification for vouchers shifted over time, from freedom and pluralism toward market competition, efficiency, and achievement gains (Carpenter & Kafer, 2012). On the other hand, the rhetoric changed as the policy matured, but the structural ambition remained expansionary. The modern voucher concept originated in market-liberal economics, positing that consumer choice would generate competitive pressure on public schools to improve. The belief or theoretical anchor of "competition would improve all schools" became the foundation of the school choice program. It also became the main measure or the standard used to determine whether those programs were successful.

The contemporary school voucher movement accelerated after Milwaukee's pioneering program began in the early 1990s and then spread into a national policy repertoire that increasingly treated private school access as a public good funded by public dollars (Witte & Thorn, 1996). Early programs were defended as narrow remedies like aid to poor children, help for urban schools, or relief for failing systems. Yet the logic of policy development consistently pushed outward. Previous programs were often defended as narrow remedies that were facilitating a better education for poor children, helping urban schools, or providing relief for failing systems. However, the logic of policy development regularly pushed outward. Once a state accepted the principle that public funds could follow a child into a private school, the emerging issues were who qualifies, how much funding followed, whether religious schools could participate, and whether programs should be restricted to particular cities or income bands. Each answered question generated the conditions for a wider one (Carpenter & Kafer, 2012; Ford, 2015).

National educational scholarship suggests that voucher expansion is both an administrative and a political process. State adoption and expansion of choice are associated with partisan control, fiscal pressures, private-school density, and political coalitions favorable to privatization (Sude & Wolf, 2021; Wong & Langevin, 2007). This undermines the benign story that choice programs simply "grew" in response to parental demand. The evidence instead suggests organized policy advocates used one program as proof of concept, then leveraged its existence to normalize further expansion (Sutton & King, 2013).

This is where Phillis's endgame argument becomes analytically powerful. He contends that voucher proponents are not merely trying to create alternatives; that is, some are seeking to eliminate any tax funds from being used to educate children at all. Phillis argues that some voucher proponents ultimately seek to reduce or eliminate public financing of education altogether. That view resonates with the deeper logic identified by voucher historians, which is that Milton Friedman treated vouchers as an interim device, not an endpoint, and later advocated that the government should stop providing education altogether, leaving parents to pay directly for their children's schooling. Phillis's claim that "many voucher zealots are working toward the elimination of any tax funds being used to educate children, hence the elimination of vouchers, as well as the public school system" captures this logic as an explicit political horizon rather than a side effect.

State-Level Examples: The Inch to Mile Pattern in Practice (Wisconsin, Indiana, Louisiana, North Carolina)

In Wisconsin, a program introduced under constrained circumstances became a template for growth. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program began as a limited experiment, but its long life after the policy window had supposedly closed illustrates that early authorization can lock in future expansion (Ford, 2015). Studies on Milwaukee have noted that participation depends heavily on program design and that the "choice" population is not randomly distributed but is determined by access and sorting (Witte & Thorn, 1996). Once that structure is established, expanding eligibility becomes easier because the policy already has a constituency.

Indiana demonstrates how finance mechanisms can be built to scale voucher subsidies. Analyses of Indiana's Choice Scholarship Program show that voucher funding is not just a matter of student portability but is an administrative and fiscal system that steadily broadens the number of schools and students drawn into the public-private funding stream (Moon & Stewart, 2016). Funding design is often the hidden engine of expansion. Once the state retools appropriations to flow through vouchers, the program acquires catalysts even when advocates still describe it as limited.

The Louisiana Scholarship Program became part of a broader choice ecosystem with funding patterns and enrollment mechanisms that reveal how the voucher apparatus grows through fiscal normalization rather than singular legislative leaps (Stewart & Moon, 2016). These programs often begin with a rhetoric of "rescue" and remain open-ended in practice. As the state adjusts reimbursement rules, eligibility criteria, and school participation standards, the policy inch becomes a structural mile.

North Carolina demonstrates how a state can move from marginal voucher policy to a broad, sustainable regime. Voucher laws enacted in 2013, gave rise to an expansion of the program foll pattern identified in comparative research on partisan control, political ideology, and fiscal conditions driving adoption and growth (Kennedy, 2019; Sude & Wolf, 2021). Once voucher policy enters the mainstream legislative toolbox, advocates can ratchet it up in the name of opportunity, even when accountability remains weak. A small policy opening may be used to establish legitimacy and justify wider access. Taking the "inch" is not a compromise with expansionists. It is their method.

The Ohio Case

Ohio is a clear and revealing example of incremental voucher expansion. The State did not leap to universal vouchers overnight. It proceeded in stages, each justified as modest, targeted, and/or necessary and then widened and normalized. The result is the inch-to-mile pattern.

The First Inch: Cleveland Scholarship Program in 1995

The first major voucher initiative in Ohio, the Cleveland Scholarship Program, was geographically limited and framed as a remedy for an urban school crisis. That narrow design mattered politically. Limited programs appear exceptional rather than systemic and, thus, easier to defend. But as voucher history shows, exceptions are rarely stable, and they establish precedents (Carl, 2017; Carpenter & Kafer, 2012). Once Cleveland established the idea that public funds could pay private-school tuition, the intellectual and legal barrier to expansion was lowered. Phillis refers to these beginnings in Ohio in his foreword to this volume.

The argument provided by Phillis is applicable in this case where Ohio politicians enacted a Cleveland-only voucher program and expanded it step-by-step. This was not policy improvisation but deliberate accretion. The choice of Cleveland as the first site was useful because it could be presented as a limited, urgent, and city-specific concern. But limited programs create institutional memory, legal pathways, and constituencies. They also establish the premise that private schooling is a legitimate use of public funds.

The Second Inch: EdChoice Initiative in 2006

The creation of EdChoice in 2006 presents a major shift from a geographically confined voucher program to a statewide structure tied to school performance. This was the second stage or the second inch, which is not universal but portable and scalable. Performance-based eligibility gave the program the appearance of objectivity while embedding a mechanism for expansion. Once eligibility was tied to school grade status, more neighborhoods and more families became potential voucher recipients.

The politics of this move were vital because the studies of state choice expansion show that policy adoption often occurs when political conditions align with market-oriented reform coalitions and fiscal arguments (Sutton & King, 2013; Wong & Langevin, 2007). Ohio's EdChoice program resembles this pattern. The program was publicly framed as helping children escape failing schools, yet that created an external threat to public school enrollment. Existing research on Ohio implies that exposure to voucher competition affected public-school performance, though not always in the direction advocates predicted (Carr, 2011). Forster (2008) claimed benefits from competition, but later critique found serious methodological problems and merely tiny reasons to believe vouchers would close achievement gaps (Lubienski & Brewer, 2014). EdChoice was not about helping a few students; it established a platform for normalizing a statewide subsidy regime.

The Third Inch: Income-Based Expansion in 2013

The 2013 income-based expansion marked a critical turning point. This move shifted the policy from school-based eligibility toward broader family-based access. That is not a trivial administrative adjustment. It changed the rationale of the program from rescue to entitlement. Once income became the gateway, voucher access could reach many more students, and the political defense of the program became more difficult to restrict. This phase also highlights the point at which competition arguments became more central. Advocates claimed that wider access would improve public schools through pressure and choice. However, recent Ohio research finds the opposite of that phenomenon. After the expansion in 2013, increased competitive pressure predicted decreased public school performance. Along with that, lower enrollment and reduced spending capacity outweighed any competitive gains (Danninger et al., 2024). This result directly supports the argument that voucher expansion can weaken the public sector rather than spur improvement.

According to Phillis, the expensive, high-quality public education for all children is precisely what billionaires target, because it requires substantial tax funding. A broad public system that includes disadvantaged and disabled students costs more. Privatizers seek to drive down those expenditures while simultaneously arguing for tax reduction. Income-based expansion did not merely help poor families. It also widened the public subsidy channel while preserving the deeper project of shifting educational costs away from the states.

The federal government via the taxpayer-funded school voucher scheme in the Big Beautiful Budget Bill will give private voucher funds via Scholarship Granting Organizations (SGOs).
By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

The federal administration has set up a voucher scheme that designates SGOs as conduits for passing on private school tuition funds to private schools. No doubt the SGOs will rake off 5% or 10% of the funds deposited for distribution. This is another scam in the government craze to privatize public schools. The prime motivation for the voucher schemes is the transfer of taxpayer funds to the private sector.

The Fourth Inch: Eligibility Explosion between 2019-2021

The 2019-2021 period brought a dramatic eligibility explosion. Once the expansion logic has been accepted, the remaining barriers to participation could be stripped away. The program grew beyond the rationale originally used to justify it. This is the classic pattern of incrementalism. Each restriction becomes a candidate for removal once the previous expansion has been normalized.

By this stage, the "choice" framework has largely detached itself from the original claim of limited rescue. Research on Ohio indicates that competitive effects are not uniformly positive, and voucher-adjacent private school adaptation studies show that the policy is reshaping the entire sector around state subsidy flows (Danninger et al., 2024; Dufault, 2023). Yet, the burden of serving students with greater needs remains concentrated in public schools. Phillis warns that most private schools are not recruiting disadvantaged and disabled students, which is supported by the broader literature on voucher sorting and neighborhood composition (Carlson & Cowen, 2015; Gooden et al., 2016). The public systems absorb the hardest cases while the private sector gains public funds.

The Mile: Universal Vouchers in 2023

The 2023 expansion is the mile that brings nearly universal vouchers. At this point, the original limiting principle is non-existent. The policy no longer depends on school failure, income thresholds, or geographic restrictions. Every child is eligible, and the State publicly subsidizes private education.

This is where the full force of the argument positioned by Phillis becomes visible. He contends that the endpoint is not merely more vouchers but the eventual elimination of public education funding. Universal vouchers are a major step toward that horizon because they sever the connection between taxation and public schooling as a common good. If every family receives a publicly financed voucher that may be used in private schools, the argument for maintaining a robust public system weakens, especially if policymakers continue to reduce support for that system. The endgame becomes the hollowing out of public provision.

Billionaire Influence, Privatization, and the Elimination of Public Education

The endgame is visible in the political economy of voucher advocacy. Phillis argues that billionaire voucher campaigners like DeVos, Walton, Bradley, and the Koch family are not simply seeking alternative schooling; they are pursuing the elimination of public education and, ultimately, a shift in which parents bear the full cost of educating their own children. This is not an exaggeration when viewed against the historical record. Billionaire influence in Denver Public Schools can be understood as part of a broader movement toward the privatization of public education. This movement operates through philanthropy, school choice advocacy, and political engagement to reshape educational governance and policy. Wealthy donors and their networks provide substantial financial support to charter schools, fund organizations that promote school choice, and support political candidates and advocacy groups that favor market-based educational reforms. These actions are not presented merely as charitable contributions; they represent a sustained effort to redefine the structure, management, and priorities of public education while reducing the influence of traditional public institutions, educators, and locally elected school boards.

Several prominent billionaires have played significant roles in advancing these reforms. MacKenzie Scott contributed $4.5 million to Rocky Mountain Prep and $6.25 million to KIPP Denver. These donations amounted to approximately $2,400 per student, a figure comparable to the total per-student allocation received by many neighborhood schools within Denver Public Schools. John Malone's $14 million contribution to the DSST charter network further strengthened the financial position of charter schools relative to traditional public schools (Sanders, 2024). Reed Hastings has emerged as both a financial supporter and an institutional architect within the school choice movement. Beyond donating to charter schools, he serves as chair of the Pahara Institute board and funded the development of a multimillion-dollar facility that houses the organization in Colorado. Similarly, Bill Gates and the Gates Foundation have invested heavily in charter school expansion, leadership development initiatives, and policy organizations that advocate for alternative models of school governance. The Walton Family Foundation has also been a central force in charter school growth, providing long-term financial support to organizations such as KIPP, Rocky Mountain Prep, policy think tanks, and local advocacy groups. Other influential figures, including John and Laura Arnold, Eli Broad, Julian Robertson, Jeff Bezos, Betsy DeVos, and the Koch family, form part of a wider network supporting charter schools, voucher programs, and market-oriented educational reforms (DeGuire, 2024).

The influence of these actors extends far beyond direct donations to individual schools. A complex network of organizations has been established to advance particular visions of educational change. City Fund, for example, has played a prominent role in promoting the portfolio model of school governance across multiple cities. RootED, an initiative connected to City Fund and financed largely through contributions from Reed Hastings and John Arnold, has received more than $40 million to support charter schools, policy organizations, advocacy groups, and school board campaigns. It also works to encourage families to enroll in charter and innovation schools. School Board Partners, another organization supported by City Fund, trains school board members to implement portfolio-style governance structures and alternative approaches to school management (Sanders, 2024). Other influential organizations within this network include the Pahara Institute, Chiefs for Change, the Broad Superintendents Academy, Colorado Charter Facility Solutions, the Colorado League of Charter Schools, Democrats for Education Reform, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

These organizations shape educational policy through multiple channels, including funding, leadership development, facility expansion, lobbying, electoral engagement, and public advocacy. Their activities promote charter school growth, support alternative governance arrangements, and cultivate educational leaders who are committed to market-based reforms. Further, these efforts suggest an ambition that reaches beyond improving individual schools. They seek to transform the broader policy environment by normalizing charter schools, increasing institutional autonomy, and positioning market principles as a central framework for organizing public education.

Financial resources are reinforced by strategic institutional access. The Walton Family Foundation, for instance, has funded schools, advocacy organizations, and policy initiatives for more than 15 years, helping to sustain a long-term reform agenda. The Gates Foundation and Walton Foundation also collaborated in establishing Colorado Charter Facility Solutions, an organization designed to expand charter schools' access to facilities and accelerate their growth. At the same time, charter schools often operate with fewer disclosure requirements regarding private donations than district-run schools. This limited transparency makes it more difficult to fully understand the networks of financial support that sustain charter expansion. Although these developments do not point to a single centralized strategy, they reveal how interconnected funding relationships can shape educational policy while remaining largely outside public scrutiny.

The expansion of voucher programs broadens this discussion beyond Denver and highlights similar patterns at the national level. School vouchers, education savings accounts, and tuition tax credits redirect public resources to private educational providers, including religious schools and homeschooling programs. Historically, voucher programs emerged in part as a response to school desegregation efforts in the Jim Crow South, where they were used to support white private academies following Brown v. Board of Education. In contemporary contexts, critics argue that these programs frequently benefit families who already possess greater educational and financial advantages. Evidence from several states indicates that a large proportion of voucher recipients were never enrolled in public schools before receiving public subsidies. At the same time, state expenditures on voucher programs have increased significantly, while funding growth for public schools has remained comparatively modest. Foundations associated with the Bradley, DeVos, and Koch families (DeGuire, 2024) have supported research, legal advocacy, and lobbying efforts that encourage the expansion of voucher policies across the United States.

These developments illustrate how billionaire involvement in education extends well beyond philanthropic giving. Financial contributions are accompanied by investments in leadership pipelines, advocacy organizations, governance reforms, charter school expansion, facility development, and voucher initiatives. Through these interconnected strategies, wealthy donors exert significant influence over the direction of educational policy and governance. The cumulative effect is a gradual shift away from democratically governed public institutions toward a more market-oriented educational landscape in which private actors and organizations exercise increasing influence over the purposes, structures, and delivery of public education.

Phillis notes that some billionaires believe they pay more in taxes than they should. Since education is a major budget category, it becomes an obvious target for cost cutting. Voucher politics, thus, dovetails with tax reduction politics: reduce education spending, reduce the tax burden, and shift public funds into private channels under the claim of efficiency. That logic appears repeatedly in the expansion literature, where fiscal restraint and market ideology combine to justify privatization (Sutton & King, 2013; Wong & Langevin, 2007).

The distributional consequences matter enormously. Private schools generally do not recruit students with significant disabilities or acute disadvantages at the same scale as public schools (Carlson & Cowen, 2015; Gooden et al., 2016). Yet a school system that educates all children, including the hardest-to-serve, is necessarily more expensive. That is precisely why the public system is vulnerable. It is a comprehensive concern. The voucher project can then claim to be "saving money" by funding fewer costly obligations, even as it leaves the public sector with the highest-needs students and diminishing resources. In that sense, vouchers are not a solution to educational inequity; they are a mechanism for reallocating educational inequity.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

8.21.2025

The endgame of the billionaire voucher campaigners is to require parents to pay the cost of education for their own children.
By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

The ultra-wealthy have enough resources and influence to rig the political system in their favor. A high-quality education system to serve all the nation's children, including the disadvantaged and those with disabilities, is an expensive proposition. (The private school sector, in most cases, is not recruiting disadvantaged and disabled students; thus, those children are typically left in the public system.)

Some billionaires believe they pay more taxes than they should be paying. With that mindset, they lobby for reduction in government expenditures. Since the education budget is substantial, they focus on driving down expenditures for education, while simultaneously lobbying for tax reductions. They believe vouchers save tax dollars.

Their ultimate goal, however, is to destroy the public system and then wean voucher recipients from vouchers to the point that parents will ultimately bear the entire cost of educating their own children. Economist Milton Friedman, father of the American school voucher system, advocated in the 1950s that the government should stop providing education, but as an interim step, provide vouchers for use at private schools.

The U.S. Supreme Court in Brown ruled that if a state provides education, it must be provided on equal terms. In the South, the voucher plan became a convenient way to avoid integration of public schools.

In the first decade of the 21st century, Economist Friedman, in speaking to the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), advocated that parents should pay for the education of their own children. Friedman may have had that end goal when he advocated for private school vouchers in the 1950s. Regardless, many voucher zealots are working toward the elimination of any tax funds being used to educate children; hence the elimination of vouchers, as well as the public school system.

Accountability, Transparency, and the "Choice" Power

The phrase "school choice" carries strong rhetorical appeal because it suggests that parents have control over where their children are educated. However, evidence indicates that this portrayal is often misleading. In practice, private schools determine who is admitted, under what conditions, and on what terms. Voucher and tax-credit scholarship programs do not remove barriers to access. Instead, they shift decision-making authority to private institutions that may restrict admissions, require additional tuition payments, or impose religious and other eligibility requirements. A study of 1,604 private schools across 11 states found that average annual tuition ranged from $8,225 for preschool to $12,373 for high school. Some schools charged as much as $72,500 for elementary and middle grades and $52,000 for high school (Klam, 2024; Patrick, 2026). These figures illustrate that access to private education remains highly unequal, even before additional fees are considered. Consequently, the language of choice can obscure a more limited reality in which access is shaped by private admissions policies and financial barriers rather than open enrollment.

Concerns extend beyond access to issues of accountability. Public schools are required to meet standards related to annual testing, accreditation, teacher qualifications, and civil rights protections, while private schools receiving public funds through voucher programs are often not subject to the same requirements. Among 21 states with voucher programs administered through scholarship-granting organizations, only 10 require school accreditation, nine require student assessments, and just two require teacher credentials. In the 11-state sample, approximately two-thirds of private schools were accredited, while one-third did not publicly report their accreditation status (National Education Association, 2025; Patrick, 2026). Lack of transparency makes it difficult for parents and policymakers to assess school quality. Accreditation plays an important role in quality assurance and the transferability of academic credits. Without it, students may encounter difficulties when changing schools, receiving credit for completed coursework, or pursuing higher education. This links the discussion with the next chapter regarding the public information page for every provider that gives shoppers deeper access to points, questions, facts, etc.

These concerns are not merely theoretical. Arizona's Universal Empowerment Scholarship Account program has faced criticism for weak oversight and reimbursement practices that allowed taxpayer funds to be used for purchases such as diamond rings and televisions. Similar reports from other voucher programs have documented spending on ski passes, golf equipment, kayaks, and theme park tickets (Klam, 2024; National Education Association, 2025; Patrick, 2026). These examples point to a broader policy problem: Public funds are being directed to private actors without the level of oversight typically associated with public expenditures.

The claim that vouchers expand educational opportunity is further complicated by evidence regarding who participates in these programs. In Arizona, 80 percent of voucher applicants had not previously attended a public school, indicating that many were already enrolled in private schools or were homeschooled. Similar patterns appear in other states, where between 65 and 95 percent of voucher recipients never attended public schools before receiving assistance (National Education Association, 2025). These findings suggest that voucher programs often provide subsidies to families already able to access private education rather than expanding opportunities for those with limited options. As a result, universal voucher programs may function less as targeted support for disadvantaged families and more as public subsidies for existing private school users.

Affordability remains a significant challenge. The proposed federal tax-credit scholarship program would make households earning up to 300 percent of the area median income eligible for assistance, extending eligibility to roughly 90 percent of U.S. households, including some with incomes approaching $500,000 in certain regions. Yet private K–12 tuition averages nearly $13,000 annually nationwide, and existing vouchers cover only about 39 percent of middle-school tuition on average (Klam, 2024; National Education Association, 2025; Patrick, 2026). Consequently, many working families must still pay substantial out-of-pocket costs, leaving private education financially inaccessible despite receiving public subsidies.

Accountability concerns become even more significant when civil rights protections are weakened. Public schools receiving federal funds must comply with Title VI, Title IX, IDEA, and Section

504 (Graber & Dragoo, 2024; Office for Civil Rights, 2025). In 2024 alone, the U.S. Department of Education received more than 22,000 civil rights complaints, including approximately 8,400 related to disability discrimination (Office for Civil Rights, 2025). These figures demonstrate the importance of enforceable legal protections when students experience discrimination or exclusion. However, the federal tax-credit scholarship proposal does not require participating private schools or scholarship-granting organizations to comply with these same protections. As a result, students facing discrimination based on race, sex, religion, or disability may have fewer legal safeguards than those available in public schools. Evidence from state programs reinforces this concern. For example, an investigation in North Carolina found that voucher funds were being directed to private schools that were significantly whiter than the communities they served (Graber & Dragoo, 2024), raising concerns that unregulated EdChoice policies may reinforce rather than reduce segregation.

The fiscal implications of these programs further strengthen the case for accountability. The federal tax-credit scholarship program is projected to cost $26 billion over ten years. The same amount could alternatively more than double Title I funding or significantly reduce the longstanding shortfall in IDEA funding. Research indicates that Title I investments improve student achievement in reading and mathematics, while increased support for special education would move IDEA closer to its intended funding level (Graber & Dragoo, 2024; National Education Association, 2025; Office for Civil Rights, 2025). This comparison highlights a central policy question: not whether public resources should support students but whether those resources should be directed through systems that are transparent, measurable, and publicly accountable. Voucher-style programs often fail to meet these standards. They increase private discretion while reducing public oversight, despite the fact that public schools continue to educate approximately 90 percent of American students.

The evidence points to a consistent conclusion that the primary concern with voucher and tax-credit scholarship programs is not simply that they redirect public funds away from public schools. Rather, they do so while reducing transparency, weakening civil rights protections, and limiting public accountability. Although the language of choice suggests greater empowerment for families, the evidence indicates that private institutions retain substantial control over access, public funds are spent with limited oversight, and mechanisms for evaluating outcomes or addressing misuse are weakened. If public funds are intended to serve a public purpose, then transparency, accountability, and enforceable standards must remain essential requirements rather than optional features.

William Phillis argues that the phrase “school choice” is fundamentally deceptive. It is private schools that do the choosing, not parents. Parents may apply, but private schools decide whom to admit, whom to reject, and under what conditions. That matters because the appearance of consumer choice obscures a much less democratic reality. Access is filtered by private institutional gatekeeping.

Research on choice participation challenges the assumption that school choice operates as a neutral market in which every family exercises equal freedom. Studies of Milwaukee demonstrate that participation is strongly influenced by program design, eligibility requirements, and institutional rules, indicating that who chooses is shaped by policy structures rather than individual preference alone (Witte & Thorn, 1996). Similarly, research on voucher programs shows that participants are disproportionately drawn from lower-performing schools and neighborhoods, while disadvantaged students are also more likely to leave voucher programs after enrolling (Carlson & Cowen, 2015). These findings suggest that access to and persistence within choice programs are unevenly distributed, calling into question the notion that school choice reflects unrestricted parental choice.

The second point that Phillis notes is transparency. Private school operators and their allies resist attempts to make schools transparent and accountable to the public. Their view is that taxpayers must pay and not ask questions. This is one of the most important analytical insights in the debate. If public dollars flow to private institutions, the public interest in disclosure is obvious. However, voucher systems often reduce accountability requirements or create partial, inconsistent oversight regimes. The legislative history of Ohio illustrates this accommodation: State officials enacted laws favorable to the school-choice crowd without treating transparency and accountability as central concerns. This is not accidental but is part of the what makes privatization possible.

Phillis also identifies a key rhetorical sleight of hand. Privatizers say taxes levied for education belong to the parents once collected by the state or local government. But taxes are public revenues, not private escrow funds. The claim that they “belong” to parents is used to justify universal vouchers, as though the state were merely returning money to its rightful owners. This argument erases the collective purpose of taxation in public education and converts a civic institution into a consumer refund. It is a compelling political slogan, but analytically it is a fiction.

Conclusion

Started through the guise of incremental crisis-rescue programs, school voucher and privatization proponents have stretched the initial inch given through the Cleveland Scholarship program into the mile that is the universal EdChoice expansion voucher program. What started as a program to address a perceived educational attainment crisis in one district incrementally turned into a universal voucher program that now seeks to address a general education crisis through free market competition with private entities throughout the State.

The flow of public dollars into the hands of private entities leads to public dollars exiting the system instead of being directly reinvested into the community. Education is a public good, and as such, the money is worth spending because it is an investment in the future of the community. In a private school system, that investment is reduced by the multiple outlets that it must first filter though. Money has to be siphoned off for profit, for compensating the executives of the private venture, and for paying dividends to the investors. Some of the public funds are invested in the students but not all. As demonstrated in this chapter's personal essay, these private ventures want to operate in an environment in which they can produce the most profit. This means making cuts and reducing expenditures to the lowest levels by lowering teacher salaries, having fewer people working in the buildings, and providing lower quality resources all in the name of profit.

The issue of profit is confounded by the issue of transparency. Private educational ventures are not subject to the same reporting requirements and sunshine laws that traditional public schools are. They are not required to have public meetings where budgets are discussed and policy decisions are made in the open. They are not required to share their ledgers with the public. Any individual can request their public school's budget and track every cent of the tax dollars that go into and out of a public school. The same cannot be said for private schools. We can find out how much they are given, but we have no way of knowing how that money is spent or exactly how much is siphoned off to pad the pockets of executives. We gave them an inch and now they are many miles down the road with billions in taxpayer dollars and no transparency into their work.

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Chapter 4

Render Unto Caesar That Which Is Caesar's

Private Schools, Public Funding, and Accountability

By *Elijah L. Fenwick-Sanders* & *Anthony W. Rose*

"Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" is not an idiom in quite the same way as some of the other sayings that introduce these chapters. It comes from a biblical passage (Matthew 22:21 KJV) in which Jesus responds to a question about taxes by distinguishing between obligations owed to civil government and obligations owed elsewhere. This was an example of Christian humility that followed Jesus's teaching of worship through the privacy of prayer and secrecy of almsgiving highlighted in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:1-8 KJV). Through the development of the United States democratic norms, the phrase has come to suggest that public duties and public resources belong in the public sphere, while private or religious matters should remain separate. In the context of school vouchers, it raises a basic question: Should public money collected for public purposes be redirected to private institutions, including religious schools? Religious private schools receive 90% of the $1.7 billion dollars of public funds provided by Ohio's EdChoice voucher program, it is appropriate to highlight the distinction between private and public interests through expectations of American democratic norms (Vouchers Hurt Ohio, 2026).

"The fox guarding the henhouse" surfaces a related concern. This idiom warns against placing someone with a direct interest in the outcome in charge of protecting what they may benefit from exploiting. Applied to vouchers, it suggests a concern about oversight and accountability. When public funds are given to private schools, especially schools not subject to the same transparency, admissions, curriculum, or accountability rules as public schools, critics argue that the public may be asked to trust institutions that have a financial interest in receiving the funds with limited public control.

Together, "Render unto Caesar" and "the fox guarding the henhouse" ask if public money should remain dedicated to public schools and who is responsible for protecting the public interest once that money leaves the public system. They introduce the larger debate over whether vouchers serve the public good or weaken the boundary between public responsibility and private benefit.

Public Funding, Public Accountability

The debate surrounding school vouchers is frequently framed in terms of choice. Proponents argue that families should have the liberty to select the school that best meets their children's needs, whether it be public, private, charter, or religious. Opponents contend that vouchers siphon resources away from public schools, undermine the unified public education system, and foster unequal access to education (Epple et al., 2017). While both sides primarily focus on where children attend school, an equally important question lies beneath that discussion: What becomes of public responsibility when public funds are allocated to private entities?

When the State collects tax dollars from the public and directs those funds to private and religious schools, the nature of the money does not lose its public character. Public money remains public in origin, purpose, and consequence. If taxpayers are required to finance a system, they are entitled to inquire about how that money is utilized, who benefits from it, whether students are adequately served, and whether the public interest is being upheld. This distinction is crucial for understanding the debate surrounding vouchers in Ohio.

The core issue at hand is not the right of religious schools to exist, which they certainly have. Nor is it a question of whether families can choose religious education for their children; they can. Additionally, it is not about the differences in operation between private and public schools; they can and do differ. The situation shifts significantly when the State begins to allocate public funds to these institutions. Once private or religious schools accept public money, they enter into a public relationship, which should entail public obligations.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

6.16.2026

SB443 as introduced would inaugurate some much-needed regulations for private schools that receive "public money."

By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

SB443 is an attempt to subject private schools that receive tax dollars to some transparency and accountability measures.

Private schools take public money for nonpublic administrative cost reimbursement, auxiliary services, and vouchers. There is no accountability for the billions of tax dollars handed over to private schools.

In a May 29, *Ohio Capital Journal* article, Morgan Trau provides coverage of a news conference held by sponsors of the bill.

Note that House Speaker Huffman contends that the fact that parents enroll their kids in private schools constitutes accountability, and he is concerned that the bill might infringe on a private entity or business. This bill is likely a non-starter because the House Speaker opposes it.

The Accountability Question

Phillis detailed how House Speaker Huffman argued that accountability of private schools was demonstrated simply through parent enrollment. Yet, the reason a parent may or may not enroll their child into a school depends on a variety of concerns including the academic reputation, school climate, convenience, and religious affiliation (Fontdevila & Vanderhoven, 2026). The State has a responsibility to provide accountability and transparency for parents and community members to be informed about their educational options and what their tax dollars are supporting. The lack of readily available information about private school operations and performance undermines a fundamental principle of market-economies to have informed choices within a marketplace. This cloak of mystery transforms the relationship between the people and the purpose of schools as the individual self-interest supersedes the public good function within our democratic society (Lubienski & Malin, 2025).

A voucher is not a private donation, nor is it a scholarship provided by a church, foundation, or private benefactor. The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (ODEW, 2025) describe it as an opportunity for public school students to attend private schools. Simply put, it is a state-designed mechanism for channeling public dollars to an educational provider. The public finances the program, the State authorizes it, and taxpayers bear the cost. The evolving goals of the publicly financed program, outlined in the previous chapter, are ultimately meant to educate children, and each of these facts establishes a public interest. If public schools are required to account for their use of public funds, it is reasonable to ask why private schools that receive the same public funds should be treated differently. Public schools operate under multiple layers of oversight precisely because they are public institutions. They are accountable to taxpayers, voters, parents, state agencies, auditors, and courts. Their budgets, board meetings, performance data, and decisions are all subject to public scrutiny and challenge (Stabile & Rock, 2025).

In contrast, voucher schools often find themselves in a different position where the virtue of their religiosity, of perceived free market efficiency or parental choice give them a free pass from state oversight and accountability (Yoon, et al., 2025). They may receive public funds while retaining private control over governance, curriculum, admissions, staffing, discipline, and finances. This creates an inequitable system that is vulnerable to fraud. Public schools remain accountable for both funding and obligations, while private voucher schools may receive public funding yet maintain private accountability. This discrepancy is the central issue.

This difference matters because vouchers create a publicly funded system operating alongside the public school system. The result is not merely "choice." As Judge Page ruled in Columbus City School District v State of Ohio (2025), it established a second education system, funded by the public but not governed by the public in the same way. That creates a basic fairness problem. Public schools are required to educate all students who come through their doors. They are required to remain open, transparent, and accountable even when they struggle (Stabile & Rock, 2025). They are required to serve students with disabilities, English learners, students facing poverty, students with behavioral needs, and students who arrive midyear. Administrators and staff must serve students no matter the student's personal identity, even if it conflicts with their own religious viewpoints. Research has shown that unregulated voucher programs have led to "cream skimming" where private schools only accept "top" students who fit their mold, which leads to a "stratification" between schools based on ability. This undermines the social cohesion of our democratic society (Epple et al., 2017). Public schools cannot simply define their mission narrowly and reject students who do not fit. That arrangement weakens public trust and undermines the basic principle that public funds should serve a public purpose under public oversight.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

11.20.25

Tax-supported religion: Is that what taxpayers want?
By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

Tax-supported religion: Is that what taxpayers want? Over a billion dollars in Ohio tax funds will go to private schools in school year 2025-2026. 90% of these dollars will end up in the coffers of religious groups. Why do private religious school operators demand public tax dollars to help support their efforts to pass their faith on to the next generation? Might it be that their faith in their faith is

lacking? Is it ethical, moral, virtuous, or upright for government to tax the general population to advance the faith of groups that operate religious schools? The EdChoice voucher scheme in Ohio is not virtuous, upright, ethical, or moral. Ohioans are beginning to realize that their elected leaders are funding EdChoice vouchers in violation of the Ohio Constitution. The EdChoice voucher scheme in Ohio is unconstitutional.

Selling Out Democracy

Public education is not simply a marketplace. It is a democratic institution. Public schools are governed through public processes because education is one of the core responsibilities of a democratic society. Communities debate school budgets, elect school board members, attend meetings, request records, challenge policies, and vote on levies. They are a pillar of local and accessible democratic institutions where American citizens can exercise their voices in our Constitutional-Republic. These processes can be messy and imperfect, but they provide a mechanism for public voice that can ensure our government is serving in the interests of the people.

The Ohio Admin. Code 3301-35-01 (2022) states, "Educational options are offered in accordance with the models adopted by the State board of education, local board of education policy, and parental approval." The EdChoice voucher expansion model shifts power away from the democratic structure of local boards of education. When public money is transferred to private schools, taxpayers may lose the ability to influence how that money is used. A parent may choose a private school, but the broader public does not choose that school's board. Taxpayers do not vote on its budget. Citizens may not have access to its internal records. Community members may not be able to challenge its curriculum, discipline policies, admissions practices, or spending decisions. A fundamental pillar of democratic norms in the United States will be undermined, as the next generation of citizens will be unable to petition their Board of Education as their school policies are ruled by fiat and their only legal recourse will be to switch schools. The essential democratic acts of negotiation, persuasion, consensus building, and compromise erode into individual choice and personal responsibility. This creates a distinction between individual choice and democratic choice. Vouchers may expand individual consumer choice for some families, but that choice is not available to all students, especially in the rural Ohio countryside (DeMatthews et al., 2025). They reduce democratic control and for the public as a whole as the rural farmer is now subsidizing urban and suburban private education.

That tradeoff is often ignored. Voucher advocates, such as House Speaker Huffman, tend to describe public education as though it exists only to satisfy individual family preferences. In that view, the State's role is to provide each family with money and allow them to shop for their preferred school. But public education has never been only a consumer product. It is also a public good tied to civic formation, equal opportunity, social stability, workforce preparation, and democratic life described throughout this book. When education is treated primarily as a private consumer choice, the public purpose of schooling can fade into the background. The question becomes where an individual child goes, not what kind of education system the public is building together.

That matters in Ohio. If public funds are increasingly directed into private and religious schools, the State is not simply helping a few families make choices but reshaping the structure of public education—creating a publicly funded private system that competes with public schools for resources while avoiding democratic controls. This should concern anyone who believes public money should remain accountable to the public. Foreman (2002) cited a survey conducted by Moe in which 86% of those surveyed believed private schools receiving state voucher funds should be required to administer standardized tests, 88% believed they should be required to hire state certified teachers, 80% agreed that the State should impose curriculum requirements, and 83% agreed that private schools receiving vouchers should submit annual financial statements. Accountability for private schools that receive public funds has overwhelming support. A system can offer choices and still preserve public oversight. But a system that sends public funds into private institutions without meaningful transparency asks taxpayers to pay without a voice. That is not democratic accountability. It is public financing with private control.

Over One Hundred Years of Corruption

The State of Ohio has a proud history of innovators, entrepreneurs, and statesmen. From the inventions of Thomas Edison to the Wright Brothers in flight to Neil Armstrong's famous moonwalk. From the smooth vocals of Dean Martin and Tracy Chapman to the hard beats of Kid Cudi and Bone Thugs-n-Harmony. From the Presidential Ohio dynasty of Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Cleveland, Harrison, McKinley, Taft, and Harding to the activism of Victoria Woodhull and the intellectual insight of Justice Potter Stewart.[1] Ohio has a rich and proud tradition of diversity and contribution to our state, region, country and world.

Yet, Ohio has another history, one that many people would rather omit but has deep consequences to our role as citizens of our democratic republic. This is a history of corruption, greed, and hubris by powerful elites. The Founders of the United States government, outlined in James Madison's (1787) Federalist No. 10, were hyper-aware of the destructive forces that the passions of self-entrusted factions can create and the need of a large federal system with enlightened statesmen to restrict their negative effects. American history is a guide that teaches the civic virtue of humility through knowing we are capable of the same hubris and destruction. The State of Ohio has a storied history of self-interested leaders who fell far from the founders' standard of enlightened statesmen. This is a historical lesson of humility meant to provide knowledge that we can succumb to the same civic vice. Did it solve all the problems of corruption in our government? Certainly not. But it provided necessary oversight, accountability, and transparency for the people of Ohio.

Fast forward to the 1920s and famous case of the Ohio Gang of President Harding's administration and one of the largest political scandals in American Presidential history. President Harding allowed his old gambling buddies to pilfer the taxpayer purse, which was expanded following the passage of the 16th amendment's federal income tax. Harry Daughty, the Attorney General, accepted bribes from bootleggers and sold pardons to the highest bidder. Charles Forbes, director of the Veterans Bureau, accepted kickbacks from medical vendors and stole an estimated $200 million, a crime for which he was later convicted. In the infamous Teapot Dome Scandal, the cabinet secretary accepted bribes from oil companies for exclusive rights to drill on public land (Tuttle & Strecker, 2021). This atmosphere of corruption led to bribery, fraud, murder, and greed, all stemming from relationships formed at the Statehouse in Columbus, Ohio.

Most recently is HB 6, Ohio First Energy Bribery scandal, which cost Ohio ratepayers over $600 million dollars and sent the Speaker of the House, Larry Householder, to federal prison (Russo, 2024). This scandal exemplifies the power and reach of "dark money," which increasingly allows unions and business corporations to spend unlimited amounts of money on political influence following the United States Supreme Court decision in Citizens United v FEC (2010). This corruption coincided with the inflation of enrollment by the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT) and the potential for fraud when school choice programs lack meaningful accountability. As Ohio's largest virtual charter school, ECOT was unable to account for 50% of its enrolled students and was found by state courts to have been overpaid by Ohio Taxpayers by $64 million dollars (Maloney, 2021). This school closed while still owing the State of Ohio $117 million dollars.

This is not intended to paint the Ohio State government as inherently corrupt, far from it. In each generation and scandal there were virtuous states people who upheld the rule of law and took corrupt power to task. But that required the courage of average citizens to take a stand against greed and corruption. So, when we demand transparency and accountability for the spending of public tax dollars, it is not an attack on religion or private institutions. It is a reaction to historical lessons that taught us the reality of our own hubris and instructed us in civic humility as we create systems to reign in our most destructive tendencies. Will there be another political scandal in Ohio? History would certainly predict so. Will the people of the State of Ohio have the ability to hold corrupt profiteers to account? The citizens of Ohio will decide.

A Dog and Pony Show

Back in 2017, I (Elijah) worked for Indianapolis Public Schools. The school board was developing a policy with the Statehouse and private charter companies to use, purchase, or share district buildings and resources. To engage the community, the board held feedback forums at area public school buildings. I happened to be working in one of those buildings. While on the surface, this appeared to be a public and private partnership, I was skeptical that the expansion of charter schools and vouchers would benefit the school district and the communities it serves. Moving money, oversight, power, and students around public and private educational systems did not address the root causes of the district's struggles. It felt like we were rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

Though a relatively young social studies teacher, I wanted to accept the invitation by the board to provide feedback on the proposal. So, I wrote a three minute speech, sought feedback from my colleagues, clarified language, and asked my building principal, a beloved mentor of mine, for approval, which he granted.

At the end of the school day, I packed my bag and went to the auditorium to attend the meeting. My principal was standing outside the door to greet members of the community and asked if he could speak with me. Little did I know that the student forum conducted earlier in the day had not gone well. Our students were critical thinkers, their questions were pointed, and their support was not easily won. In the Ohio River Valley we like to say: crap flows downhill. District leaders pulled my building principal aside and took him to task. They believed he was to blame for the lack of support in the charter-public school partnership. They accused him of coaching students and planting questions. Every deflection they could think of was placed on his shoulders, as long as they did not have to answer for the shortcomings of their policy. Politicians never like to take responsibility for the inadequacies of their own policies. Ultimately, this partnership was a foregone conclusion. If my building principal could not lead our community to support the plan, then they would find a leader who could. He had to be a team player, that's what district leadership wanted.

I did not know any of this.

So, he succumbed to district pressure and asked me not to read my speech. After a day of teaching, my head was spinning because I was so caught off guard. I simply repeated the question, which he confirmed. To my regret, my confusion turned to anger. I handed him my speech and said, "Well, here you go. I am not going to stay for your dog and pony show." Then I walked out.

I felt betrayed. I felt that this was not a partnership, it was a takeover. I felt my civic and professional responsibility was to advocate for my students and community. We did not need more competition; we needed more resources. This proposal was a threat. But whether I read the speech or not would not have changed the conclusion. I was right, the forum was a dog and pony show. It was an exercise in performative democracy.

A few years later, that principal apologized to me for asking me not to speak. I graciously accepted. We talked about the pressures placed upon them and our alignment on many issues facing the district at that time. In the end, we both wanted to provide high quality education for every student we served. Unfortunately, the neo-liberal, market-driven, efficiency and accountability framing of education policy created pressures where the primary goal of the district was survivability, which ultimately undermined the education of the students we both wanted to serve.

Today in 2026, the takeover is complete. The Indianapolis Public School Board does not exist. The Indianapolis Public Education Corporation has taken its place. This is a new nine-member board of education appointed by the mayor to oversee facilities, transportation, property taxes, and school accountability. The power of the people to oversee their community schools is now filtered through the mayoral office. In the end, charter schools have money, special interest groups, and political power while the people have a vote. The public can influence the appointments of the mayor, but in a post-Citizens United era, we would have to suspend the reality of American politics to think that money does not have an outsized influence in favor of business interests.

All the signs are present in Ohio. The slow expansion of charter schools and vouchers in the late 1900s to the universal vouchers of today: It is the same playbook. It undermines our democratic norms as performative boards give citizens a microphone but silence their voice. They are tacitly responded to as the real power that exists behind closed doors. The die is cast; the conclusion has been made.

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.

You don't allow a trojan horse to enter your house twice.

Every Ohioan needs to pay attention to what happened in Indiana, because it is already here in Ohio. Our public schools and local school boards are under threat. School board elections can be relatively cheaply bought by education corporations and interest groups to hand over their authority to oversee education just as the Statehouse has done with private schools. Without democratic accountability and transparency, this is not a partnership; it is a takeover.

The Foxes Guarding the Henhouse: Fiscal Accountability

The idiom "the fox guarding the henhouse" captures another danger in voucher policy. The phrase describes a situation where someone with an interest in the outcome is trusted to police the very system from which they benefit. It is not necessarily a claim that every actor is dishonest. It is a warning about incentives. That distinction is important. The argument is not that every private school is corrupt. Many private and religious schools are sincere, mission-driven institutions operated by people who care deeply about children, as are most public schools. Many families choose them in good faith. Many educators in those schools work hard and serve students well. But public policy cannot be built on trust alone. A system does not need universal dishonesty to require oversight but only enough money, enough opportunity, and weak enough controls to create risk. Research on voucher programs shows that accountability is difficult when private schools that receive public money are not evaluated through comparable measures, when participation in evaluation is voluntary, or when private schools use different assessments than public schools (Egalite et al., 2020).

When large amounts of public money are permitted to flow through private systems with limited transparency, the risk of corruption increases. These risks may include inflated tuition, the misuse of funds, weak enrollment verification, payments received for students who are no longer attending, conflicts of interest, related-party transactions, self-dealing, improper fees, selective reporting, or public dollars supporting institutions that later close without public explanation. Even when no laws are broken, weak oversight can allow public money to be used in ways that do not serve the public's interest. The danger is structural.

Studies of voucher programs also show that the effects of school choice vary across states and contexts, which strengthens the argument for public reporting rather than assumptions about effectiveness (Canbolat, 2021; Egalite et al., 2020). When schools receiving funds are allowed to operate behind private walls, the public has fewer tools to detect abuse. When financial records are not fully public, taxpayers cannot easily see where money goes. When schools are not subject to comparable audits, misuse may remain hidden. When enrollment and performance data are limited, the public cannot know whether the program is working. When private schools are allowed to define their own success, the state may end up funding institutions without meaningful evidence of public benefit.

This is why accountability should not be treated as an insult. Requiring oversight does not assume guilt. It protects legitimacy. Honest schools should benefit from clear standards because transparency builds trust. If voucher schools are using public money well, then public reporting should strengthen their case. If they are not, taxpayers deserve to know and respond accordingly. The fox guarding the henhouse is not a claim that every fox attacks every hen. It is a warning that systems should not rely on self-policing when public resources are at stake. Public trust requires more than good intentions. It requires rules, records, audits, transparency, and consequences. Speaker Huffman's rejection of a bi-partisan voucher accountability bill, SB 443 or the Take the Dough, We Ought to Know Act, stifles meaningful discourse over the use of billions of taxpayer dollars and raises familiar concerns about the misuse of public funds (Donaldson, 2026).

The accountability gap is especially visible for students with disabilities. Public schools carry legal and ethical obligations to serve students with disabilities. They must identify needs, provide services, follow procedures, create plans, involve families, and protect student rights. These requirements are not optional. They are part of the public's responsibility for education.

Voucher programs can complicate that responsibility. A voucher may appear to offer choice, but for families of students with disabilities, the choice may come with hidden costs. A private school may not offer the same services as a public school. It may lack specialized staff, therapies, transportation, behavioral supports, or assistive technology. The public school must provide for the federal protections provided through the Individual with Education Disabilities Act, regardless of whether the student is enrolled in a private school (Christensen, 2007).

It may accept a student initially but later determine that the student's needs exceed what the school is willing or able to provide. Families may also find that, by accepting a private placement, they lose access to procedural protections they would have had in the public system. Research on school choice and disability also shows that access is shaped by intersecting factors such as disability, race, class, geography, transportation, and the availability of reliable information (Waitoller & Lubienski, 2024).

A choice that requires a family to give up rights, services, or protections is not the same as a choice freely made among equivalent options. The disability issue also reveals a broader problem with vouchers. Public schools remain responsible for serving all students, including those with the greatest needs. Private schools may be able to serve some students well, but they may also have greater discretion over whom they serve. If voucher schools can accept public funds while declining students whose needs are too complex or costly, then public schools are left with reduced funding and greater responsibility.

That creates a two-tier system. One system receives public funds but may select its obligations. The other system receives public funds and must serve everyone. The burden does not disappear. It remains with public schools, often after resources have been diverted elsewhere.

This is one of the strongest arguments for attaching public obligations to public money. If private schools receive public funds, they should be required to disclose clearly what services they provide, what rights families retain or waive, what supports are available, and what happens if a student's needs increase. Families should not have to discover the limits of a voucher after leaving the public system.

This raises hard questions about what Ohio is choosing to build. If the same public dollars had been invested in public schools from the beginning, more districts might have been able to create the support that families are now forced to search for elsewhere. They might have hired additional intervention specialists, provided one-on-one aides, expanded autism-specific classrooms, improved professional development for general education teachers, and built stronger behavioral, sensory, and communication supports inside the schools that students already attend. Those investments would have provided the necessary interventions and support to prevent families from reaching a crisis point and parents feeling there is no realistic option but leaving the public system. If public schools remain legally and morally responsible for serving every child, the State should first ensure that those schools have the funding necessary to fulfill that responsibility. Public money should not create the illusion of equal opportunity while leaving the hardest responsibilities to public schools.

Finding Grandma's House

When we first began looking for a school that would accept the Ohio Autism Scholarship, I (Anthony) thought the hardest part would be making the decision. I imagined that we would look at a list of schools, compare a few options, visit the ones that seemed like a good fit, and then choose the place where our child would have the best chance to grow. I knew it would be emotional. I knew it would be stressful. But I did not expect the process itself to feel so unclear, so lonely, and so overwhelming.

Like many parents, we started with the official spreadsheet of approved providers. On paper, that sounds helpful. The State provides a list, and families can use that to find a school or service provider that accepts the scholarship. But I quickly realized that having a list is not the same thing as having guidance. There were so many providers listed that it was hard to know where to begin. The number of names should have felt encouraging, as if there were many options available to us. Instead, it felt like being handed a map with hundreds of dots on it but no roads, no distances, no warnings, and no way to know which direction was worth taking.

What made it harder was that there was no meaningful way to rank the providers. There were no clear metrics that would help us compare them. We could not sort by parent satisfaction, student outcomes, staff experience, classroom model, intervention approach, teacher-to-student ratio, availability, or whether the provider had experience with children whose behaviors disrupted a traditional classroom setting. There was no obvious way to tell which schools were thriving, which ones were barely operating, which ones had openings, or which ones might actually be a good match for her. The spreadsheet gave us information, but not the kind of information that helps a parent make a decision about their child's education.

So, like many families probably do, we tried to make the list manageable ourselves. We started sorting by county. Since we live in the Dayton area, Montgomery County became the most logical starting point. We hoped that narrowing the list geographically would help us find several schools or providers close enough to visit. But even that process was discouraging. Once we sorted the list, there were far fewer realistic options than the original spreadsheet suggested. In Montgomery County, we found only one provider who even asked us to come in for a visit.

That was one of the most frustrating parts of the search. We called and called. Most calls went to voicemail. We left messages and waited. Some places never called back. Others may have called back eventually, but by then, we were already feeling that a decision had to be made to ensure there would be a place where she could be supported. When a school or provider did answer the phone, the conversation often did not last long. Instead of feeling like an invitation to learn more, many calls felt like a screening process. The few people who answered often had a laundry list of stipulations, requirements, or conditions that we did not meet. It was not always said harshly, but the message was clear: Our child did not fit what they were looking for, or we did not fit the circumstances they were willing to serve.

That was painful. As a parent, it is hard enough to admit that your child needs something different. It is hard enough to say out loud that the current environment is not working. But it is even harder when the systems that are supposed to provide options feel like they are quietly telling you that your child is too complicated, too difficult, or too disruptive.

The one provider in Montgomery County who did ask us to visit was approachable and willing to talk, and for that we were grateful. But even then, the model they offered did not seem like the right fit. They were working with small groups rather than providing one-on-one support. For some children, small groups might be exactly what they need. We believed one-on-one support was important for us. A major part of the challenge was that our child was often the one causing the disruption in class. That is difficult to write, but it is true. She was not simply a student who needed extra help while the rest of the classroom continued smoothly around her. Her needs affected the room. Her behaviors affected the teacher. Her struggles became part of the daily rhythm of the classroom.

That reality is especially complicated because my wife was an intervention specialist in the district. She knows what it is like to manage a classroom. She knows how much teachers carry every day, how much patience and planning it takes, and how quickly one student's needs can change the entire environment. As parents, we loved our child and wanted her to be understood, supported, and included. But as educators, we also understood the other side. We knew what it meant when a child disrupted instruction for the teacher trying to keep everyone safe, engaged, and learning and for the other students in the room. But even when you understand that intellectually, it is still hard emotionally. It is hard to hear the reports. It is hard to know that the teacher is exhausted. It is hard to wonder whether the other families are frustrated. It is hard to feel protective of your child and apologetic to everyone else at the same time.

That is why the search for a school mattered so much. We were not looking for a perfect place. We were not looking for someone else to "fix" her. We were looking for a setting where she could be supported in a way that made sense for her. We were looking for people who understood autism not as a label on a funding form, but as part of a child's daily experience. We were looking for a place where her behavior would not immediately make her seem like a problem to be managed, but as a student whose environment, communication, sensory needs, and relationships all mattered.

Eventually, we did find a provider but not in Montgomery County. The place that finally felt right was in the next county over. It is run by a mother whose own son is autistic, although he is grown now. That mattered to us. There was something different about walking into a place created by someone who had lived some version of this journey herself. The provider is wonderful, and from the beginning it felt less institutional and more human. In some ways, it feels a little like going to grandma's house. There are smiling faces, warmth, patience, and a sense that the people there are genuinely happy to see her. After so many unanswered calls, dead ends, and conversations that made us feel like our daughter was a problem to be filtered out, finding this provider felt like a gift. We are incredibly glad we found them and even more grateful that we found a place where we are welcomed. Making the drive each day isn't easy, but for us it is important.

The Ohio Autism Scholarship is supposed to give families options. In theory, that is a good thing. Families should have access to services that meet their children's needs, especially when a traditional setting is not working. But our experience showed me that an option is only meaningful if it is accessible, understandable, and real. A spreadsheet full of providers does not necessarily mean families have true choices. A long list does not help much if no one answers the phone, if most providers have restrictions that exclude your child, or if there is no way to evaluate quality before making contact.

The experience also left me questioning who really benefits when public money moves through a voucher or scholarship system like this. Some of the larger providers appear to have built entire business models around these funds, and as a parent, I cannot help wondering how much of the money is going directly into meaningful support for children and how much is being absorbed by administrative structures, marketing, facilities, or profit. I do not begrudge good providers being paid for good work. Our daughter's provider has been wonderful, and I am grateful that the scholarship helped make that possible. Her having the one-on-one attention has been awesome. I don't want to "throw out the baby with the bath water." I think we should support the small providers who are providing these services for the right reasons. But the larger system raises hard questions. Instead of forcing families to leave the public system in search of help, we might have strengthened the system that was already responsible for serving every child.

The process also made me think about how much responsibility is placed on parents. Families are expected to become researchers, case managers, advocates, data analysts, and persistent callers all at once. We had to sort through the spreadsheet, identify possible providers, call them, leave messages, track who responded, ask the right questions, interpret what they meant, and decide whether the services offered matched our child's needs—all while also parenting, working, and trying to support her through the very challenges that made the search necessary in the first place.

My wife and I have sufficient time, resources, and an inside knowledge of the system. For families without those resources, I can only imagine how overwhelming it is. Even knowing the language and the system, we still struggled to understand which providers were viable. That should concern us. If a program is designed to help families, then families should not have to decode it on their own.

Looking back, what stands out most is not just the difficulty of finding a provider. It is the gap between the promise of choice and the reality of choice. The promise says that families can use the scholarship to find the right setting for their child. The reality, at least for us, was a spreadsheet, unanswered calls, unclear quality, and very few realistic options. The promise says that parents can choose. The reality is that many parents may only be able to choose from whoever calls back, whoever has space, and whoever does not screen them out before meeting their child.

These kids deserve more. Families should not have to guess which providers are most effective and should not have to rely on chance, persistence, or someone chosing to answer the phone. A scholarship program should include transparent information about providers, including services offered, staffing models, student outcomes, family feedback, capacity, and the types of needs each provider is prepared to support. It should help families navigate the system rather than simply handing them a list and expecting them to figure it out.

Our search for the best fit was not just an administrative task. It was a deeply personal experience shaped by love, worry, guilt, hope, and frustration. It forced us to confront the difference between having a legal option and having a practical one. It reminded us how difficult it is to advocate for your child when every door seems partly closed. And it showed us that families navigating disability services need more than funding. They need information, guidance, responsiveness, and providers who are willing to see the child before they see the complications.

Same Money, Same Rules: Academic Accountability

Voucher programs are often defended with the claim that private schools produce better educational outcomes (DeMatthews, et al., 2025). If that claim is central to the argument for vouchers, then it should be tested openly. Public money should produce public benefit, and public benefit should be visible. The public has a right to ask basic questions. Are students in voucher schools learning more? Are they performing better academically? Are they graduating at higher rates? Are they prepared for college, careers, and civic life? Are private schools serving comparable students, or are their outcomes shaped by selective admissions and retention? Are struggling students staying in those schools, or are they returning to public schools after difficulties arise? Are public dollars improving education or subsidizing private tuition for families who would have chosen private schools anyway?

These questions cannot be answered without meaningful data. A school cannot claim public funds on the basis of educational success while refusing to provide evidence of that success. Nor should the State assume that a school is effective simply because families choose it. Families choose schools for many reasons: religion, safety, discipline, tradition, convenience, peer groups, athletics, class size, or dissatisfaction with a local district. Those reasons may matter to families, but they do not automatically prove that public money is producing stronger educational outcomes.

Public schools are required to report performance, even when the data is unflattering. They are judged, ranked, criticized, and sometimes punished based on public measures. Voucher schools should not be exempt from scrutiny if they are publicly funded. This does not mean every school must be identical nor that private schools must abandon distinctive missions or pedagogical approaches. But the public should be able to evaluate whether public funds are being used to educate students effectively. Accountability is not the enemy of educational quality but one way the public determines whether quality exists.

One predictable objection is that public accountability would destroy what makes private schools private. Voucher supporters may argue that if private and religious schools are required to follow public rules, they will lose their independence, distinctiveness, or religious character (Forman, 2002). They may say that imposing too many conditions on vouchers would turn private schools into public schools. The Ohio Christian Education Network (OCEN, n.d.b), a division of the Center of Christian Virtue, is a lobbying group that represents more than 170 Catholic and Evangelical schools at the Ohio State House.

The OCEN (n.d.a) states their goal as follows:

> to see Ohio offer "true-choice" to families. This means any initiatives to promote school choice programs come with as few strings attached as possible, ensuring private Christian schools do not have to compromise their operating principles in order to have students enrolled on state-sponsored scholarships or tax credit programs. (para. 5)

There is some truth in the concern that public money brings public conditions, but that is not a flaw in the argument. It is the argument. Private schools remain free to preserve their independence, but full private independence is most defensible when schools operate on private money. A school that wants to avoid public audits, public reporting, nondiscrimination requirements, academic transparency, or fiscal oversight can opt not to accept public funds—a real choice.

Ohio could also consider a tiered accountability model. Schools receiving a small amount of public money might meet basic reporting and compliance requirements. Schools receiving substantial public money should meet stronger standards. Schools where most students are publicly funded should be treated much more like public institutions. At some point, when public funding becomes central to a private school's operating budget, the claim of purely private status becomes harder to sustain. The principle is not complicated: The more public money a school receives, the more public accountability it should be willing to accept (Malkus & Candal, 2024). Recent problems in Arizona illustrate the risks of expanding voucher programs without sufficient oversight. In 2024, an Arizona grand jury indicted two out-of-state residents who allegedly used false, forged, or fraudulent documents to apply for voucher funds for 50 children, 43 of whom did not exist, receiving more than $110,000 through the State's Empowerment Scholarship Account program. The case shows that, when public dollars are distributed through lightly regulated choice systems, accountability mechanisms must be strong enough to verify eligibility, prevent fraud, and ensure funds are used for legitimate educational purposes (Sandoval, 2024).

Such an accountability model would not end school choice, but it would make the choice more honest. Families would have better information. Taxpayers would have better oversight. Public schools would no longer be held to one standard while publicly funded private schools operate under another. Private schools that use public money responsibly would be able to demonstrate that responsibility. Schools unwilling to meet public expectations could continue operating privately without public support. Same money, same rules is not a punishment. It is a democratic safeguard.

Ohio's voucher debate cannot be reduced to a question of whether parents should have choices. Choice matters, but so do taxation, transparency, democracy, civil rights, and public trust. A system that expands individual choice while weakening public accountability has not solved the problem of education. It has shifted responsibility away from public institutions and into private systems that may not be equally open to public review.

Leveling the Playing Field

My wife and I (Anthony) have been looking for a different house for quite a while. If you have young kids, you will know that a big part of the home buying decision often relates to the purported quality of the school district. Because my wife works for a school system with open enrollment for families of staff members, this isn't that much of a concern for us. Even though her district doesn't have a 5-star rating, we know that it provides a solid education. But school rankings are of prime importance to many families with young kids. Those families who have the means end up "bidding up" the real estate prices in the areas with highly ranked school districts. Higher property values mean more taxes and, thus, more money spent on schools. So, I want to ask a question. What if a child's ZIP code didn't determine the quality of their education? What if districts were adequately funded and teachers were actually incentivized to join "struggling" districts.

In this version of Ohio, the State levels the field by making sure every school has what it needs before asking families to shop for alternatives. Property taxes no longer create vast differences between districts where one school can offer advanced labs, newer buildings, smaller class sizes, updated technology, arts programs, counselors, and extracurriculars, while another school struggles to maintain buses, textbooks, and basic staffing. The State recognizes that public education is not supposed to be a lottery. It is supposed to be a public promise. If public schools are underfunded because local property tax receipts vary so widely from one community to another, then offering vouchers before fixing that inequity puts the cart before the horse. It treats the symptom before addressing the structure that produced it.

If Ohio truly equalized school funding, the conversation about vouchers would change. The argument that families need vouchers to escape "failing schools" would have to confront a deeper question: Did those schools fail, or were they underfunded, overburdened, and abandoned? A level playing field would not result in every school becoming identical. Communities would still have different histories, cultures, needs, and strengths. But every school would begin with enough: enough qualified teachers, enough support staff, enough safe facilities, enough technology, enough enrichment, and enough stability to plan beyond the next levy cycle.

A serious policy proposal would go even further by funding teacher pay at a higher level in disadvantaged districts. Instead of using the label of failure to justify the sending of public money elsewhere, Ohio could use that label as a signal for deeper public investment. If a school serves students with greater needs, fewer resources, higher poverty, greater instability, or more concentrated educational challenges, then the State should make that school one of the most attractive places to teach. Higher salaries, retention bonuses, loan forgiveness, smaller class sizes, paid planning time, mentoring support, and strong working conditions could help draw experienced and highly effective teachers into the schools where they are needed most.

This would also change the moral logic of the voucher debate. Too often, the State identifies struggling schools and then treats them as places to escape from. But if Ohio truly believed every child deserved access to an excellent education, it would not abandon those schools; it would strengthen them. It would put the horse back before the cart by investing first in the teachers, staff, and supports that make schools successful. A truly level playing field would also have to include proper funding for students with special needs. Equity cannot mean giving every school the same dollar amount and pretending that every child requires the same support. Some students need individualized instruction, aides, therapists, assistive technology, accessible transportation, smaller settings, behavioral supports, or specialized services that cost more because they are more intensive. In a just system, those needs would not be treated as financial burdens placed on local districts or as reasons for families to fight for basic services. They would be recognized as part of the public promise of education.

In this imagined Ohio, special education funding would follow the actual needs of students rather than forcing schools to stretch inadequate resources. A child's disability, learning difference, medical need, or support plan would not depend on whether their district has a strong property tax base or whether parents have the time and resources to advocate relentlessly. Schools would have enough staff, training, and specialized support to serve students well without having to take away from other classrooms. Proper funding for special needs students would not be an add-on to equity; it would be one of the clearest tests of whether equity is real.

I imagine what it would feel like for a child in a low-property-wealth district to walk into a school that looks and feels as valued as a school in an affluent suburb. I imagine parents no longer having to calculate whether moving across a district line is the only way to secure opportunity. I imagine teachers choosing those schools not as acts of sacrifice, but because the State has made them professionally sustainable places to do meaningful work. I imagine school boards debating vision instead of survival.

This future also forces a moral reckoning. If Ohio can find public dollars for vouchers, tax credits, and private alternatives, then perhaps the question has never been whether the money exists. The question has been who the State believes deserves it. A progressive vision of school funding would insist that public money first fulfill the public obligation: strong, equitable, well-resourced public schools for every child.

In that imagined Ohio, "choice" would no longer be a substitute for justice. Families would still make decisions, but those decisions would not be driven by desperation, scarcity, or fear that their local school has been left behind. The State would no longer ask children to compete for opportunity through vouchers while leaving the underlying structure untouched. Instead, it would repair the structure itself. It would put the horse back before the cart by funding public education first and then asking what kinds of choices families still need.

This is the Ohio I imagine: not perfect, not free of conflict, but honest enough to name inequity and brave enough to fund its solution—a state where public education is not treated as a private consumer good but as a shared civic responsibility—a state where "leveling the playing field" is not a slogan, but a budget, a policy, and a promise. Oh, and we found a house. The district doesn't have a 5-star ranking either, but we think the schools are solid. We are giving our neurotypical son the "choice" to attend the public school there or the public school his mom works at. Either way, we feel confident that Ohio's public schools are the best choice for us.

Conclusion

The phrase "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" reminds us that some things remain public even when they are transferred into private hands. Tax dollars are one of those things. When public funds support private or religious schools, the public retains a rightful claim to oversight. The school may be private. The mission may be religious. The curriculum may be distinctive. But the money came from the public, and the public has a right to know whether it is being used lawfully, fairly, effectively, and in service of a genuine public purpose. This is not an argument against religious education. It is not an argument against private schools. It is an argument against public funding without public responsibility. It is an argument for proper public funding of public schools. If Ohio chooses to fund private and religious schools through vouchers, it must also require transparency, accountability, nondiscrimination, fiscal oversight, and educational reporting. Otherwise, the State creates a system in which public schools remain bound by public obligations, while private schools receive public dollars without comparable duties. That arrangement is not fair to taxpayers. It is not fair to public schools. It is not fair to students with disabilities. It is not fair to families who believe they are receiving equal choices. And it is not consistent with the idea that public education serves a common democratic purpose.

Public money should not vanish the moment it enters a private institution. If Ohio requires the public to pay, then Ohio must require the recipients to answer to the public. Rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's means that public funds remain public funds, and public funds demand public accountability.

Notes

1. This information was sourced through the Ohio History Connection (n.d.). This statewide historical society offers great insight into famous Ohioans who contributed to our state character. Most information about Ohioans can also be found through local historical societies that pride themselves on highlighting the contributions of local figures to our state and national characters. https://www.ohiohistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Famous-Ohioans-List.pdf

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Chapter 5

All That Glitters Isn't Gold
Can Parents Really Choose?

By *Alyssa J. DeZeeuw*, *Erin Laffrey*, & *Susan Korea*

Voucher programs are often presented as pathways to freedom, opportunity, and parental empowerment and promise families the ability to leave struggling public schools and choose educational settings that appear safer, more effective, or better suited to their children's needs. This language of choice is especially persuasive because it frames education as a marketplace in which parents, rather than public systems, can determine what is best for their children. For families of students with disabilities, that promise can be even more compelling, since choice is often portrayed as a way to secure more individualized attention, specialized services, and relief from schools that may seem under-resourced or unresponsive.

The appeal of this promise begins to weaken when examined closely. The freedom celebrated by voucher advocates is often unevenly distributed because not all families have the means to secure the same access to information, transportation, financial flexibility, or schools willing and able to serve their children. For students with disabilities, these limitations become even more significant. A voucher may provide access to an alternative setting, but it does not necessarily guarantee the legal protections, related services, or educational supports available in public schools under federal law. What appears to be an expanded opportunity may instead place families in settings where responsibility shifts away from the public system while support becomes less certain. School voucher systems have broader implications for educational access and equity. Following is the Ohio Ohio Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding's (Ohio E&A's) Count 3, part of its court case entitled Vouchers Hurt Ohio (as cited in Poetter, 2023):

> Private school vouchers make segregation in public schools worse. Private schools take public tax dollars while applying litmus tests to pick and choose their students based on academics, athletics, disciplinary records, financial status, race, and religion. That's unconstitutional. (p. x)

In the push for school choice, public schools are left with classrooms that do not reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. The voucher programs reject students based on demographic characteristics, specifically ability, and other criteria, and many of those students return to their home school after experiencing limited success within the EdChoice system.

Although these programs are promoted as mechanisms for expanding educational options, they also reveal the limits of a policy model built on market logic rather than equitable obligation. This chapter argues that, for many students with disabilities, the promise of choice glitters more than it delivers. Public funds may follow the child, but meaningful accountability and consistent protections often do not.

The Shine and Sparkle

Something shiny and new seems like the next best thing, following the idea that maybe the grass is greener on the other side; that is the hook and initial appeal of the EdChoice program. The voucher program touts the illusion of sparkling new and alternative options to public schools, giving parents the chance to hand-select the best and brightest system to meet their wishes, but the glitter soon gives way to grime, exposing the gap between the program's promises and realities.

The Ohio voucher program is presented as a glittering opportunity for families to determine the educational setting that best aligns with their views, values, and beliefs while supporting student needs. However, that is rarely the case. While voucher advocates frame choice as empowering parents, the reality is far more complex.

"Choice" is frequently defined by the private, charter, or religious institute; very few of them guarantee access to their schools. A family's school choice is merely rooted in an opportunity to apply; whereas, in practice, schools often exercise choice as much as, if not more than, families do. Students with disabilities, those requiring additional services, and other marginalized learners may face barriers to admission, inadequate services, or pressures that ultimately result in their departure from a school. Rather than parents freely choosing schools, many schools effectively choose which students they are willing and/or able to serve.

School choice has promised a golden opportunity to families looking for "better quality" education. The shine and sparkling reality of parental choice and freedom fade, though, as parents encounter schools' exclusionary practices aimed at students who do not fit their mission. These practices inherently halt the ability to self-determine the school of best fit; often parents and students find that they are not accepted, are conditionally accepted, or are outright rejected based on their minority status. While voucher programs cherry-pick their student body, public schools remain responsible for educating all children, even those who return from private school placements. Marketed as an alternative and higher-quality educational opportunity, the "choice" often ends up as less equitable experiences for many families. The tale serves as a warning that all that glitters isn't gold; beneath the promise of school choice is a system that perpetuates exclusion, deepens inequities, and establishes control.

School Choice, Disability, and Educational Fit: A Parent's Reflection on Public and Private School Experiences

It's an incredible amount of pressure to be a parent, isn't it? I (Erin) know that, for me, from the minute my daughter was born, I felt this incredible responsibility to protect her and make all the very best decisions for her. I wanted to be a good, no, a great mother, and I wanted her life to be filled with endless possibilities and opportunities—for her to thrive. This story is painful to write because it is not only Olivia's educational journey but also a reflection of my own choices as a parent. It is a story about advocacy, learning, and the realities families face when navigating educational systems for children with disabilities.

The Decision to Pursue Private Education

When Olivia was preparing to enter kindergarten, our financial circumstances limited our ability to move into a stronger school district. At the same time, media reports about violence and behavioral issues in our assigned public district heightened my fear. I associated private education with safety, discipline, and stronger academic opportunities, and I made my decision through that lens.

Looking back, I realize that my decision was driven more by fear and uncertainty than by a comprehensive evaluation of the schools available to my child. I assumed that a private education would automatically provide opportunities and support that public schools could not. What I failed to understand at the time was that selecting a school and finding the right educational fit for a child with disabilities are not necessarily the same thing. A school's reputation, exclusivity, or private status does not guarantee that it can meet a child's unique academic, social, and emotional needs. In many cases, the most important factor is not whether a school is public or private but whether it has the resources, expertise, and commitment to help a child thrive.

We enrolled Olivia in a parochial school and were encouraged to apply for the EdChoice voucher. The voucher application was included in the registration packet, and the school administrator handled the whole process for us. The voucher was touted as a "gift to families who were unfortunate enough to be zoned in underperforming schools."

At the time, I viewed enrolling Olivia in a private school simply as an opportunity to provide something "better" for my child. Influenced by the local news, I was seeking a school that felt "safe" for my child. What I did not understand at the time was that private schools operate under different legal obligations than public schools. Unlike public schools, which are bound by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) and required to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), private schools have far fewer mandates regarding disability identification and accommodations. That distinction would become critically important as Olivia's educational journey unfolded.

Shortly after kindergarten began, Olivia struggled significantly. Her teacher sent home a notebook each day documenting behavioral concerns, what Olivia would later call her "bad girl notebook." She had difficulty sitting still, talked excessively, fidgeted constantly, and struggled to regulate herself. These behaviors were framed as discipline problems rather than potential symptoms of disability.

Eventually, Olivia was diagnosed with ADHD. Medication helped improve some of her attention and impulsivity, but it did little to address her emotional and social struggles. Those challenges remained and would continue shaping her educational experience.

As kindergarten ended, it became clear that medication alone was not enough. I requested a multi-factor evaluation and sought accommodations. The school offered a 504 plan (the legally required and binding plan for accommocations needed by students with disabilities) with minimal supports, such as preferred seating and extended testing time. Additional requests for movement breaks, sensory supports, and access to a quiet space were denied. As the years progressed, Olivia began creating her own accommodations. She often sought refuge in the nurse's office when overwhelmed, but this was labeled as "attention-seeking." Her social struggles deepened, and she became increasingly identified as "bad." Even her accommodations often reinforced exclusion, with seating arrangements that isolated her from peers.

By middle school, her executive functioning challenges were impossible to ignore, yet the school denied practical supports. Every accommodation had to be fought for, and implementation was inconsistent. Instead of addressing her needs, meetings often focused on her failures. In many ways, Olivia was being socialized into what Jackson (1968/1990), in *Life in Classrooms*, described as the hidden curriculum of schooling, wherein compliance and behavioral regulation are often valued alongside or even more than academic learning. For students with disabilities, particularly those with executive functioning challenges, these unspoken expectations can create exclusion rather than belonging.

Looking back, I now understand that these experiences were not simply individual decisions but structural differences between private and public education. Public schools are legally required to identify and support students whose disabilities affect educational performance, while private schools often retain far more discretion in what they provide.

From Advocacy to Partnership

At the end of Olivia's eighth-grade year, my husband's job relocated us to Georgia. This time, I approached the process differently. I researched schools, toured campuses, and met with administrators. We ultimately chose a public high school.

For the first time, I experienced what a true educational partnership looked like. When school staff reviewed Olivia's 504 Plan, they did not question whether accommodations were necessary; they asked what additional supports would help her succeed. The conversation was collaborative and student-centered. Staff recommended accommodations such as a quiet testing environment, an adjusted workload when needed, access to a designated support person, and sensory breaks throughout the school day.

Olivia's journey taught me that school choice, by itself, does not guarantee the right educational fit. For families of children with disabilities, understanding the differences in legal protections, accountability, and available support services across educational settings is critical. What Olivia needed was not stricter discipline, greater compliance, or a more exclusive educational environment. She needed flexibility, individualized support, understanding, and a place where she felt valued. When those needs were met, she began to grow academically, socially, and emotionally. That experience reinforced a powerful lesson: A child's success depends not on whether a school is public or private, but on whether the school is equipped and willing to meet that child's unique needs. For Olivia, that made all the difference.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

11.25.2025

The "school choice" lie.

By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

School privatizers champion the catch phrase "school choice." Privatizers argue that parents have the right to choose private schooling at full or partial public expense. They declare that the taxes levied for education belong to the parents after the State and/or local officials collect the tax. State officials in Ohio have enacted laws that accommodate the wishes of the "school choice" crowd without regard for accountability and transparency.

The Ohio politicians that first enacted the Cleveland voucher program (which was limited to a specified number of vouchers paid from the Cleveland school budget) at a later time expanded the voucher scheme to accommodate poor kids in a specific type of district. The voucher rhetoric was that poor children would have the same right to private school choice as those already enrolled in private schools at private expense. EdChoice expansion for students within a specified income threshold was added. Later the universal voucher scheme was enacted with no income threshold. Vouchers now go to students that never were enrolled in public schools.

Private schools choose students. The "right to choose" decision is made by the private schools.

Private schools choose to take tax money for private purposes with no disclosure regarding the use of it.

These same private school operators and their allies in "voucherville" resist all attempts to make the school transparent and accountable to the public. Their view is that taxpayers must (shall) pay and not ask questions.

William Phillis of the Ohio E&A highlights a central contradiction in the school voucher debate. Voucher advocates often present "school choice" as the expansion of parental rights and access to educational opportunity. Yet the reality is more complicated. While public funds increasingly follow students into private schools, the public accountability that accompanies those dollars often does not.

Ohio's voucher programs have evolved far beyond their original purpose. What began as a limited initiative aimed at providing options for specific groups of students has grown into a universal subsidy system that benefits families regardless of income and, in many cases, regardless of whether a student has ever attended a public school.

Phillis makes the important point that school choice is not always reciprocal. Public schools are obligated to educate every child who walks through their doors. Private schools, by contrast, generally retain the authority to decide whom they admit and under what conditions students may remain enrolled. This is significant for students with disabilities, whose educational needs may require accommodations and services that some private schools are unwilling/unable to provide.

Promise vs. Reality

To understand the reality of school choice, we must first examine the promises made by Ohio's Educational Choice Scholarship (EdChoice) regarding what the vouchers are designed to do. According to EdChoice, the voucher program is designed to provide students, particularly those from economically and academically disadvantaged backgrounds, with opportunities to attend private schools. Vouchers are promoted as a tool of parental empowerment, allowing families to choose schools they believe are better equipped to meet their children's academic, social, or special needs (Lavertu & Gregg, 2022). According to the EdChoice program, 100% of Ohio students are now eligible for vouchers, and more than 100,000 students participate (EdChoice.org).

A recurring theme across the school choice literature includes the gap between what is promised and what families actually experience. On paper, school choice sounds simple: more options, better schools, safer environments, and stronger opportunities for kids. The idea is appealing because it suggests that if one school is not working there is always a better one waiting. As the realities of private education surface, however, the more complicated that promise becomes.

School choice proponents argue that promoting choice and creating a competitive market improves education for everyone. If families can leave struggling schools, public schools will be forced to improve. In theory, that makes sense. But theory and reality do not always line up. According to the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (ODEW) data (as cited in Melvin, 2026), there were 1,652,539 students attending Ohio schools during the 2024-25 school year; 88% were served by public school districts, while only 12% were enrolled in nonpublic schools. According to data from the ODEW, Ohio spent $1.09 billion on its five private school voucher programs: the Autism Scholarship, Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship, Cleveland Scholarship, Education Choice Scholarship, and Educational Choice Expansion Scholarship—$1.09 billion that could otherwise have been invested in Ohio's public schools. As public education funding is stretched thinner, school districts are forced to make difficult choices, including reducing staff, eliminating specialized programs and advanced coursework, postponing critical technology upgrades, and scaling back extracurricular opportunities that enrich students' educational experiences. The continued expansion of voucher programs threatens the long-term stability of public education by diverting resources away from neighborhood schools. If this trend continues, it risks undermining, and ultimately dismantling, the public school system that serves the vast majority of Ohio's children.

Marketing School Vouchers to Families

In discussing the concept of choice, it is crucial to consider how parents learn about alternative school options and the EdChoice Voucher. One targeted approach is through private schools, which have been found to run aggressive marketing campaigns to attract families. These marketing campaigns can include mailers, billboards, social media ads, school-led seminars, and outreach at local community events. EdChoice is introduced as "free tuition" or "scholarships." Many private institutions include information about EdChoice on their school websites and in their enrollment packets. Marketing materials can target particular zip codes of underperforming schools (MacGillis, 2024).

These marketing strategies raise questions about the concept of school choice, as the information provided about alternative school choices is filtered through the institution that stands to benefit financially from increased enrollment. Critics raise concerns regarding the financial incentives created by voucher programs that are public subsidies for private-school attendance expansion; some private schools respond by increasing tuition, thereby, capturing a portion of the public benefit intended for families (Ferreyra & Liang, 2012). Because these schools operate as private institutions, they are not required to publicly disclose the rationale for tuition increases.

Parental Decisions to Exit Public Education

Research indicates that parents switch schools for both "push" and "pull" reasons. Families are often "pushed" to leave schools because of concerns about safety, bullying, a child's loss of interest in learning, or dissatisfaction with the school environment. Parents may be "pulled" to schools they believe offer better opportunities, safer learning environments, stronger academic support, and greater opportunities for their children's overall development (Arnett & McShane, 2026). Factors that may influence parents' decisions to leave public schools include academic quality, school climate, discipline, class size, safety, and the desire for educational environments that align with religious or moral beliefs (Bukhari & Randall, 2009). The "no excuses" model is often a draw for families, as it promises strict behavioral codes, an intense focus on academics, structured routines, and a focus on college readiness (Bukhari & Randall, 2009).

The bill of goods that families are sold doesn't always come to fruition. A common critical argument in education choice research is that the promises of school choice do not always match the outcomes families experience. One of those promises is the academic improvements that result from a private school setting. Research findings show that these benefits are not consistent across all settings or student groups. Some students experience gains, but others see little to no change in academic performance, suggesting that choice alone does not guarantee improvement (Dobbie & Fryer, 2013). According to Carnoy (2017), the evidence does not consistently show that voucher programs improve student performance, suggesting that school choice alone may not lead to better educational outcomes for all students (Spector, 2017).

One widely promoted promise is that school choice expands access to high-quality schools for ALL families. In reality, access can be uneven. Students must be accepted before applying for a voucher. The school sets admission criteria and can require essays, entrance exams, or interviews, and private institutions can still charge full tuition to families with vouchers (The Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative, 2026). These enrollment processes and the private school's choice to enroll students based on its admission criteria raise concerns that this choice may reproduce rather than reduce existing inequalities. The reality is that the schools choose, not parents.

Another central promise is improved school climate, discipline, and safety. Often, private institutions function as "no excuses" schools with a focus on highly structured settings, compliance, and rigidity. The focus is on rigorous academics, discipline, and college readiness. The reality of "no-excuses" schools is more than the promise of strict discipline and high achievement for all students. Research and school-based studies show that while these schools can produce academic gains in some settings they also come with significant trade-offs and criticisms in practice. These rigid practices with an emphasis on order and discipline can encourage students to suppress their voices and autonomy. These rigid models do not allow space or consideration of children's developmental stages or needs. Rather than creating opportunities for individualized education, all students are held to the same expectations. This one-size-fits-all approach can lead to repeated disciplinary actions, undermining a child's sense of self-worth and belonging (Wilson, 2019).

Critics of the model also point to high rates of suspension and exclusionary discipline practices, arguing that strict behavior policies can sometimes result in students being removed or pushed out rather than supported in addressing underlying challenges. Private institutions are free to suspend or expel students at any time for any reason, as they are, again, not held to the same standards as public institutions, which are obligated to retain and provide services to all students.

Access to Choice

The promise of school choice as a system that creates equal opportunity is in practice limited by access, socioeconomic status, and geography. While school choice policies are often designed to give all families the ability to select better educational environments, research shows that not all families are equally positioned to take advantage of these options. Families with more resources, time, transportation, and information tend to have greater access to higher-performing or more desirable schools. In contrast, lower-income families may face barriers that restrict meaningful choice (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2013).

A key component to consider in the myth of choice is geography. Geography can play a central role in limiting access to school options. Many school choice systems are still influenced by residential location, transportation access, and school capacity; the ability to "choose" is often constrained by where families live. As a result, school choice does not always lead to broad educational equity but can instead reproduce or even intensify existing patterns of social and economic inequality.

Leveling the Playing Field

EdChoice vouchers promise to level the playing field for academically and economically disadvantaged students. However, research shows that universal private school voucher programs disproportionately subsidize affluent families whose children already attend private schools rather than expanding equitable choices for students with disabilities. Conversely, participation rates for eligible students with disabilities linger around 2% across most voucher states. This gap is compounded by the fact that private entities lack traditional public school accountability standards. State-level data across the voucher programs indicate that the vast majority of voucher recipients never attended public school. In 2023, the EdChoice voucher program expanded by removing income limits. As a result, 60,000 new voucher recipients were added; however, private school enrollment remained flat because most recipients were already enrolled in private schools when they began using vouchers (Crawford et al., 2024).

Students with disabilities can be admitted to private schools, but access is not guaranteed as it is in public education systems. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), public schools are required to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to eligible students with disabilities, ensuring access to specialized instruction and related services. Private schools are generally not bound by the same obligation to provide FAPE. As a result, private schools may legally deny admission to students with disabilities if they determine they cannot reasonably meet the student's needs or provide necessary accommodations. If a child with a disability is accepted into a private school, that school can reduce or eliminate services for that child with no warning. While federal civil rights laws such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibit discrimination in institutions receiving federal funding, many private schools operate with greater autonomy because they do not receive the same level of public funding as public schools.

Consequently, families may face barriers when they attempt to access private school options for students with disabilities, particularly when specialized supports or individualized education services are required, and may not realize they are forfeiting their legal rights and protections by attending the private school (IDEIA, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Private schools are limited in their discrimination against students with disabilities only by the public accommodations provision under Title III of the ADA. Since religious private schools are exempt from the ADA, these schools are free to discriminate against students with disabilities in their admission decisions. Since 97% percent of the private schools that participated in the Indiana School Choice program in 2018–2019 are religious entities, the ADA protections are, for practical purposes, nonexistent for students who participate in the program (Farrell & Marx, 2018).

The Realities of School Choice for Students with Disabilities: Fools' Gold

Fifteen percent of school-age students in the United States received special education services during the 2021–2022 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Under the IDEIA, students with disabilities are entitled to FAPE, including services and accommodations in the least restrictive environment (IDEIA, 2004; No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). School choice is promoted as an educational opportunity through the guise of parental empowerment. However, those impacted by unequal access, loss of legal protections, funding, lack of accountability, and academic outcomes are the students, specifically those with disabilities. Identified students whose parents enroll them in a private school through the voucher program have limited safeguards under federal disability law (Farrell & Marx, 2018). If a student's disability requires greater than a minor adjustment, private schools are under no legal obligation to accept the student. For students who require specially designed instruction and related services, a private school may not be a consideration (Raj, 2019).

Services Lost

Public schools must serve all students, regardless of socioeconomic status, physical or mental ability, race, ethnicity, or language background; all are guaranteed access to public education. Public schools cannot control student demographics to boost state report cards or increase academic rigor; therefore, it is important to review and assess claims, data, and student outcomes. In comparison to public school districts, school choice programs depict minimal acceptance and inclusion of students with disabilities (Senese & Winters, 2025).

Private schools are not held to the same state and federal standards as public schools. School choice programs may require families and students to forgo services, accommodations, and protections provided under Individual Education Programs (IEP) or 504 plans. Students with disabilities who utilize a voucher forfeit equal access to appropriate educational services (Raj, 2019; Senese & Winters, 2025). Some federal legislation extends to choice schools, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, but both laws aim to ensure access rather than a right to education (Raj, 2019). Identified students lose the rights provided under IDEIA if they continue to receive services in the private school system (Farrell & Marx, 2018). Voucher programs are not required to outline changes to a student's programming upon acceptance; appropriate education, parental participation, disciplinary protections, and school accountability constitute four major losses of rights that students and families experience while participating in the school choice program (Raj, 2019).

IEPs (Individualized Education Programs), legally binding documents that outline services, specially designed instruction, and accommodations for students with disabilities to receive a free and appropriate education, are not required of private schools (Raj, 2019). Private schools can implement service plans with which they are provided. The district of residence, or the public school system the student would have attended, however, is responsible for creating the written plan and holding the service plan meeting, yet again taking away critical time, resources, and funding from the students who remain in the public system.

Additionally, under IDEIA, parents must be included and provide consent throughout the eligibility process, including consent to implement the services in the IEP; however, by accepting the school choice voucher, parents relinquish their rights to be included in decision-making. Parents waive their rights to special education, specifically the due process provision of IDEIA, through which disagreements between parents and the school district can be resolved regarding outcomes, services, or time (Raj, 2019).

IDEIA provides additional protections for identified students regarding exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions. Public schools must determine whether the concern relates to the needs of the disability before imposing disciplinary consequences. As students lose the protections of IDEIA, students can be subjected to "no excuses" discipline (Senese & Winters, 2025) or simply be expelled from a private school, as parents do not have the right to challenge the cause, supports, or type of consequence as it relates to remaining enrolled in the "choice" school (Raj, 2019). Specifically, students with behavioral and emotional needs are placing immense trust in a system to provide intervention and support rather than to penalize or to push them out for nonconformity (Raj, 2019).

The lack of checks and balances, such as due process in special education, heightens concern about school accountability. Private schools are not held to ongoing assessment measures, and public funding is unregulated under most voucher legislation, leading to systemic abuse (Raj, 2019). The lack of oversight in voucher programs compared to the strict adherence to state and federal laws required by public schools creates a prime opportunity for inequitable educational experiences through the perceived notion of choice for students with disabilities. Beneath the promise of increased EdChoice lies a less visible exchange that can leave families with fewer rights and fewer avenues for recourse—the fools' gold.

Classification and Declassification

School choice programs have lower enrollment of students with disabilities in comparison to traditional public schools (Gilmour et al., 2023). Additional factors contribute to variations across states and types of school choice programs. As previously discussed, access to and acceptance of a voucher for nontraditional public schools are the first barriers. The differences in the proportion of students receiving special education services are also influenced by the classification and declassification of disability categories (Gilmour et al., 2023; Senese & Winters, 2025).

Senese and Winters (2025) found that some programs view disability labels as an external factor; however, there is a degree of subjectivity when qualifying a student with mild to moderate disabilities, creating an opening for declassification when entering a school choice program. Discrepancies among professionals, school districts, and states can lead to variation in how the qualifying disability category is established. In a policy review, Gilmour et al. (2023) analyzed data from charter and private schools in Newark, New Jersey, to determine whether a student was more likely to change their classification status if they attended a school choice school than if they remained in a traditional public school. Students in grades K–6 who were previously identified as having a disability with an IEP in the public schools were between 20 and 30% less likely to continue to receive services in the school choice program than students who continued their education in the public school system (Gilmour et al., 2023). Tuchman and Wolf (2017) found that students identified in the public school sector are 60% more likely to lose the disability classification when attending a charter school. Lastly, in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, Wolf et al. (2012) reported that 5.5% of students who did not qualify for services in the program would have qualified for traditional, special education services in public schools.

Furthermore, ties between funding and disability categories can impact enrollment and classification practices (Senese & Winters, 2025), which may be altered when providing services or when determining whether a student is appropriately eligible to receive services and to be placed in the category that best fits their needs (Senese & Winters, 2025). The differences in enrollment among identified students should be considered not only as variations in student needs but also as differences in classification and declassification practices and institutional incentives.

Differences in Disability Acceptance: The Moderate Intensive Population

Private schools that accept federal funds may exclude students with disabilities if their needs require more than minor adjustments. It is claimed that these schools would be unable to meet or maintain the student's requirements (Farrell & Marx, 2018). These practices further ostracize students with low incidence or moderate to intensive disabilities. The exclusionary practices of school choice programs further discriminate against and segregate students with more significant needs (Raj, 2019). In the Newark School Choice program, Gilmour et al. (2023) found a significant gap in enrollment among students with moderate-to-intensive disabilities, further documenting consistent variation in access and participation rooted in students' classification status.

This consideration is especially important when involving students with disabilities because students with more significant disabilities are disproportionately underrepresented among applicants to choice schools (Senese & Winters, 2025). School choice does not simply redistribute students; it may also reshape who receives special education through differences in accountability, financial incentives, and classification practices.

Just as children who cannot pay tuition hope for school acceptance to their school of choice, students with a disability contend with services, classification, and funding practices that are determined by the school regarding enrollment and retention. Disability status, although not overtly discriminated against, is a key consideration for voucher programs as they evaluate who they allow and keep in. Parents may be able to choose the schools to which they apply; however, the choice ends with the application. The power resides in the discretion, goals, vision, and capacity of the choice program. What may be marketed as freedom is quickly relinquished into the hands of the schools.

The Realities

Public schools are held accountable for the students and staff within the local district. This accountability extends to credentialing and ensuring that teachers have the necessary education, licensure, and certifications to instruct students (Farrell & Marx, 2018). The federal government oversees credentialing and academic achievement through IDEIA; however, due to a lack of state and federal regulation, private schools do not uphold the same standards as traditional public schools. CREDO, the Center for Research on Educational Outcomes, conducted observational studies to compare assessment scores across various charter and public schools. The study includes student demographics data such as gender, race, ethnicity, grade, socio-economic needs, English learner status, and prior test scores. Students with disabilities failed to make academic gains in English Language Arts or Mathematics, on average, compared with their public school peers (CREDO, 2009, 2015); however, there is some variation across charter schools included in the study (Senese & Winters, 2025).

Pushed Out

Even when students with disabilities are accepted, many students return to their traditional public school due to choice schools' counseling or the pushing out of students after they enroll (Senese & Winters, 2025). Choice schools may guide students out by outlining the lack of best fit, discussing the inability to provide resources, citing strict disciplinary practices, and threatening grade-level retention (Senese & Winters, 2025). Students with disabilities are more likely to return to their public schools than their typical peers (Ni, 2012).

After the Shine – Now What?

When the promises of school vouchers collapse under the weight of reality, the question is not how to improve the voucher system. The question is why public policy continues to fund a model that may leave students with disabilities with fewer protections, less accountability, and greater instability (Farrell & Marx, 2018). For families who discover too late that the glitter of choice is not golden, the aftermath is often a return to the public system carrying academic gaps, interrupted services, and the emotional toll of displacement. Asking "Now what?" then is not a question about reforming the illusion. It is a question of naming the damage vouchers create and insisting that those in control of establishing public education policy stop financing it.

Voucher programs are sold through the language of freedom, empowerment, and escape. But for many students with disabilities, what they actually produce is a shift in risk. Public dollars move to private schools, yet the legal obligations that protect children do not reliably move with them. Families may be lured by promises of small class sizes, individualized attention, strict discipline, or safer environments only to find that such promises are selective, conditional, or unsustainable. If a student's disability requires costly supports, behavioral flexibility, or specialized staffing, the limits of that choice often become visible very quickly. At that point, the burden falls not on the school that failed to serve the child but on the family and, eventually, the public district that must welcome the student back.

This aftermath matters. The return to public school is not an unfortunate side effect of an otherwise sound policy but is evidence of the policy's failure. A system that invites children out of public schools without guaranteeing equal rights, comparable services, or transparent accountability is not expanding opportunity. It is privatizing uncertainty.

The Problem Is Not Misuse – It's the Model Itself

It is tempting to describe the harms surrounding vouchers as implementation problems: inadequate oversight, information, and high-quality participating schools. But that framing is too generous. The central problem is the model itself. Voucher programs are built on the assumption that education is best governed by market choice rather than public obligation (Berends, 2015). That assumption breaks down most sharply for students with disabilities because their education depends not simply on access to a building, but on enforceable rights, specialized services, procedural protections, and long-term continuity (Farrell & Marx, 2018; National Coalition for Public Education, n.d.).

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

3.23.2026

A warning to private schools that take vouchers: What the government funds, the government runs.

By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

Private schools typically are organized and maintained because the organizers and operators wish to provide programs, services, and opportunities for students that are not provided or cannot be provided in the public school setting. Private school operators and advocates resist as many government regulations and as much red tape as possible, so as to be able to control their own mission; otherwise, they lose their reason for existence.

As private schools depend more and more on "government" funds, the public will demand greater public accountability and transparency; thus, these schools will become a mirror image of "government" schools. The other option will be for the private school to go out of business.

What government funds, government runs. Some private schools may want to consider joining the EdChoice voucher litigation effort.

The warning in the post to private schools that accept vouchers captures the contradiction at the center of voucher policy: "What government funds, government runs." This point is especially relevant here because voucher advocates often want public money without public obligations. Yet once taxpayer dollars support private schooling, questions of accountability, transparency, nondiscrimination, and educational responsibility cannot be dismissed as governmental overreach but are the necessary public responses to privatized risk. That imbalance reveals why the rhetoric of parental empowerment is misleading. A parent cannot exercise real choice in a system where the school holds the power to deny admission, reduce support, counsel a family out, or quietly fail to meet a child's needs. What is presented as freedom is often only an offer of conditional access. In return, families themselves assume more risk while schools retain power to decide whom they will serve and for how long.

Students with Disabilities Bear the Cost of the Illusion

Students with disabilities are especially vulnerable within voucher systems because they need more than a seat—they need evaluations that lead to services, service plans that are implemented, professionals trained to support diverse learning and behavioral needs, and legal recourse when schools fail to comply. Public schools are far from perfect, but they operate under obligations that families can invoke. Voucher schools often offer appearance without equivalent duty (Farrell & Marx, 2018; National Coalition for Public Education, n.d.).

This matters not only at the point of enrollment but after the placement unravels. A child may lose months or years of specialized progress while in a setting that cannot or will not meet their needs. A family may discover that individualized support meant informal goodwill rather than legally grounded services. A student may be stigmatized as difficult or disruptive in a discipline-heavy environment that interprets disability-related needs as defiance. By the time the child returns to public school, the harm has already occurred.

That harm is academic, legal, and emotional. There may be lost instructional time, regression in skill development, interrupted therapies, fractured peer relationships, and deepened distrust in schools altogether. Voucher advocates often speak as though departure from public school is the end of the story. For many students with disabilities, it is only the beginning of another cycle of instability.

Now What? Stop Treating Vouchers as Harmless Alternatives

The most important response is not to fine-tune voucher systems around the edges. The response is to stop pretending they are harmless alternatives to public education. For students with disabilities, vouchers should be understood as a policy that weakens rights by moving children into less accountable settings while preserving the language of opportunity. The answer, then, is not expansion; it is resistance.

Policymakers should stop directing public funds into systems that do not guarantee full educational protections. A school that refuses to meet its full public obligations should not be publicly subsidized. If a program results in pushout, service gaps, selective admissions, or return migration to public schools without consequences for the private provider, it is not a success story. It is a warning.

The alternative is not marketplace logic but deeper investment in public schools so families do not seek escape in the first place. That means funding special education, improving staffing ratios, expanding inclusive practices, strengthening behavioral and mental health supports, and ensuring parents can advocate effectively. The answer to a struggling public institution is not further fragmentation but making it more equitable, responsive, and fully public (Berends, 2015).

The Real Lesson After the Shine Wears Off

Once the shine of vouchers fades, what remains is a clearer view of what was being sold. The promise was freedom; the reality is conditional acceptance. The promise was empowerment; the reality is a shifted burden. The promise was better opportunity; the reality is often fewer rights and less recourse, especially for students with disabilities.

"All that glitters isn't gold" is more than a clever idiom for this chapter. It names the structure of the policy. Voucher programs glitter because they are packaged as rescue, innovation, and choice. When examined through the experiences of students with disabilities, they often amount to fool's gold: attractive at first glance, costly in practice, and incapable of delivering what they advertise.

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Chapter 6

The Tide Is Turning

Voter Resistance, Litigation, and Public Pushback to School Vouchers

By *Ryan C. Kwapniowski* & *Emma Errgang*

For years, voucher expansion has been framed as both inevitable and empowering, advanced through the language of choice, opportunity, and parental control. Yet that framing tells only part of the story. Beneath the surface of legislative growth, resistance has been building in courtrooms, at ballot boxes, through public accountability campaigns, and within local communities. Ohioans and public-school advocates across the country are not only challenging the size and scope of voucher programs; they are challenging the assumptions that have made those programs politically possible. At the center of that resistance is a deeper question about the purpose of public education. If public education is understood only as a service delivered to individual families, then vouchers appear as one more option in a marketplace. But if public education is understood as a democratic institution shaped by public funding, public accountability, and public voice, then litigation, organizing, voting, and demands for transparency become more than reactions to policy. They become efforts to defend education as a shared public obligation.

Public Education, Democratic Resistance, and the Ohio Voucher Fight

For decades, the story of school vouchers in Ohio has been told as a story of expansion (Lubienski et al., 2023). Voucher programs have grown in size, eligibility, cost, and political reach, moving from targeted interventions to broader systems of public subsidy for private education. That story is incomplete. Across Ohio and the nation, public-school advocates, educators, voters, legal organizations, community coalitions, and taxpayers are challenging the assumption that voucher growth is inevitable, democratically settled, or publicly supported (Baxter et al., 2025; Millard, 2026).

This chapter argues that the tide is beginning to turn. Not because vouchers have disappeared, or because their political supporters have lost influence but because voucher expansion is increasingly contested in public view. Ohio's EdChoice program continues to grow through legislative action, yet legislative passage should not be mistaken for public consensus. The defeat of private-school choice measures in Kentucky, Nebraska, and Colorado is evidence that voucher politics look different when voters are asked directly to decide (Baxter et al., 2025). In this sense, the ballot box complicates the narrative of inevitable voucher expansion.

Ohio shows how resistance takes institutional and legal form. The Vouchers Hurt Ohio litigation is not merely a technical court battle; it represents a broader effort by public-school communities to challenge the State's use of public funds for private education. William Phillis, of the Ohio Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding (Ohio E&A), notes that four amicus curiae briefs representing 17 organizations were filed in support of the Coalition/Vouchers Hurt Ohio case. That coalition support matters because it shows that the lawsuit is not isolated. It is part of a wider public-school defense movement that includes districts, civic organizations, education advocates, and legal actors asking whether the State can expand private-school subsidies while still meeting its obligation to public education.

At the same time, public pushback is becoming more visible, organized, and evidence-based. Rather than opposing vouchers only in broad moral or ideological terms, public-school advocates are increasingly using district-level data, fiscal comparisons, and public-facing tools to help communities understand where public dollars are going and what voucher expansion means locally (Millard, 2026). This work reflects a larger change in the politics of vouchers: Advocates are asking who pays, who benefits, who is accountable, and what happens to the shared public system when private options are publicly funded.

The language of "choice" itself is also under pressure. Voucher advocates have long framed vouchers as opportunity, rescue, and parental empowerment. Yet research suggests that voucher advocacy has shifted over time, especially as claims about academic achievement have become harder to sustain (Lubienski & Malin, 2021). Critics increasingly argue that "choice" can obscure deeper questions about public obligation, democratic governance, and community power. Johnson (2022), for example, frames school choice as a form of community disempowerment when it directs attention away from collective investment toward individualized exit. Brewer's (2025) work on rural conservative resistance further complicates the assumption that voucher opposition comes only from urban, liberal, or union-centered constituencies. In rural communities, public schools often function not simply as service providers but as civic anchors.

"The Tide Is Turning" positions Ohio within a national pattern of resistance. This chapter does not repeat the full history of EdChoice expansion, the constitutional argument, the religion and public funding debate, or the accountability and equity critiques developed elsewhere in this book. It focuses on public pushback: litigation, voter resistance, coalition-building, public messaging, and democratic accountability campaigns. The tide is turning because communities are learning to name what is at stake, trace where public money flows, challenge the language of "choice," and defend public education as a shared democratic obligation.

The Tide Is Turning: Interpreting Resistance, Public Voice, and Democratic Accountability in Voucher Policy

The idiom, "the tide is turning," is often used to describe a change in momentum. It suggests that a force once moving strongly in one direction has begun to encounter conditions that alter its course. The phrase marks a shift in the environment: What once appeared politically inevitable becomes newly contested, newly visible, and newly open to public challenge. Applied to Ohio's voucher debate, the idiom does not mean that voucher expansion has ended. It means that the political meaning of voucher expansion is changing.

The metaphor of the tide helps clarify this tension. The incoming tide represents the long growth of voucher policy: expanded eligibility, rising costs, broader legislative support, and the normalization of public dollars flowing to private-schools. Earlier chapters examine the historical, constitutional, religious, accountability, and equity dimensions of that expansion. This chapter uses the tide metaphor to focus not on the rise of the tide alone but on what happens when that tide meets resistance. The shoreline becomes the space of democratic contestation: courts, school districts, voters, advocacy coalitions, public accountability campaigns, and local communities.

That resistance has always been present in voucher politics. Public-school advocates, educators, parents, legal scholars, and community leaders have long questioned whether voucher programs weaken public education, redirect public resources, reduce democratic oversight, and transform schooling from a public obligation into a private marketplace. What appears to be changing now is the organization, visibility, and evidentiary force of that resistance.

The tide metaphor also captures a shift in public communication. Increasingly, public-school advocates are using data, district-level fiscal comparisons, public messaging, and accountability tools to make voucher policy visible to local communities. The Voucher Accountability Project, for example, reflects an effort to translate the consequences of voucher expansion into information that taxpayers, parents, school boards, and voters can understand (Millard, 2026). This matters because voucher policy often operates through complex funding structures that can make public costs difficult to see. When advocates trace where public dollars go, compare voucher spending to public-school funding, and ask who remains accountable, they are challenging not only the policy itself but also the conditions that have allowed it to grow with limited public scrutiny.

The phrase "the tide is turning," therefore, points to a growing shift in public awareness and democratic engagement. More communities are questioning voucher policies, more organizations are speaking out, and more voters are signaling discomfort with directing public funds to private education. What was once presented as settled policy is increasingly being scrutinized, contested, and debated in public view. The metaphor captures this change in momentum: a growing recognition that public education remains a deeply valued democratic institution and that decisions about its funding and future deserve public accountability and public consent.

Ohio in the National Context

Ohio is not alone in its fight against voucher expansion. It is part of a broader national pattern in which the assumed inevitability of voucher expansion is being challenged. For example, Utah Judge Laura Scott (as cited in Cabrera, 2025) ruled in April 2025 that the State's "Utah Fits All" scholarship program violated the State constitution as it was a "program within the public education system that is not free and is not 'open to all the children of Utah,'" which subsequently "diverts constitutionally appropriated funds from already underfunded public schools" (para. 2). Arizona is also an example to consider as what was the nation's first universal voucher program, referred to as the "Empowerment Scholarship Account" voucher program or simply ESAs, has now become a cautionary tale and financial case study. Arizona's ESA program, first expanded in 2022, reached $869 million in 2024, with expectations surpassing $1 billion as program participation nears 90,000 students (Sievers, 2025). Despite this, an Arizona state audit resulted in findings that challenge the assumption that the program is widely supported. A 2024 survey of Arizona voters found that 80% believe private schools that are receiving state-issued funding should be held to the same financial, academic, and employment standards as public schools (Sievers, 2025). This call for accountability reflects the arguments made by Ohio's public school advocates.

These state-level cases reflect a pattern that extends beyond any single state or courtroom. Where voucher expansion has moved quickly and with limited public scrutiny, resistance has followed through litigation, ballot campaigns, audit findings, and public organizing. Courts in Utah and Ohio are being asked the same foundational question about whether legislative action is enough to satisfy a state's constitutional obligation to public education. Arizona's experience with escalating costs and failures in oversight further validate the accountability arguments that Ohio advocates have been voicing.

The common denominator in these cases pertains to more than a particular political affiliation or general legality. It is the consistent presence of democratic tension that arises when public funds are invested in private institutions that are not held to the same standards of transparency, access, or accountability as the public schools such funds were designed to support. Legislative passage, as Ohio's experiences have exemplified, is not synonymous with public consensus. This remains a significantly contested issue.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

02.2.2026

American voters have rejected 20 of 22 statewide ballot issues related to school choice policies since 1970. The two measures approved concerned charter schools. No voucher issues have ever passed.

By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

Of 22 statewide school choice ballot measures, only Georgia and Washington voters passed charter issues. In Washington, the vote was 50.69% in favor. In Georgia, the vote was 58.53% in favor. Both of those were charter school issues.

The voucher scheme includes direct payments to private voucher schools, tuition tax credits, and education savings accounts (ESAs). In voucher issues, one ESA and three tuition/education tax credits have been on the ballot, all of which were defeated. All the rest of the voucher issues failed.

Of the 22 ballot issues (vouchers and charters), the average percentage of rejection is 61.45%, not even close! Regular vouchers were defeated by an average of 64.65% (2 to 1).

In 2024 Colorado, Kentucky, and Nebraska voters turned down school choice issues.

The results described by Mr. Phillis are important not because they establish that every voter rejects every form of school choice, but because they complicate the assumption that legislative expansion reflects broad public agreement. Voucher programs have repeatedly advanced through state legislatures, where policy decisions are shaped by party leadership, advocacy organizations, campaign donors, and negotiations that are often distant from direct public scrutiny. Ballot measures create a different political environment. They require voucher supporters to explain the policy to the public and require voters to consider whether the language of "choice" justifies the use of public funds for private education. The repeated rejection of voucher-related measures suggests that support for school choice may become less stable when voters are asked to evaluate a specific funding mechanism rather than respond to an abstract promise of parental freedom.

The 2024 elections provide a particularly useful comparison. Private-school choice measures were rejected in Kentucky, Nebraska, and Colorado, three states with different political cultures and education systems (Baxter et al., 2025). These outcomes do not mean that the voters in all three states shared the same motivations. In Kentucky, the proposed constitutional amendment would have created a path for public funds to support students outside the public school system. In Nebraska, voters considered whether to retain a state-supported private-school scholarship mechanism. In Colorado, voters rejected an amendment that would have constitutionalized a broad right to school choice. The policy details differed, but each campaign required voters to confront a similar issue: whether public support for education should be expanded beyond publicly governed schools.

These defeats are especially significant because they occurred at a moment when voucher advocates were achieving considerable success in state legislatures. Baxter et al. (2025) describe the outcomes as a "trifecta of defeats" for supporters of private-school choice. Their analysis suggests that the voucher movement faces a persistent gap between legislative success and public persuasion. A program may advance through a legislature while remaining vulnerable when placed before the electorate. In that sense, ballot outcomes reveal a distinction that is central to this chapter: Political power is not the same as democratic consent.

Brewer's (2025) analysis of conservative attitudes toward vouchers helps explain why this resistance cannot be reduced to a partisan divide. Rural conservatives may be skeptical of voucher policies because private-school alternatives are limited in many rural areas, and public schools often function as community institutions. A rural public school may be one of the community's largest employers, a gathering place for athletic and civic events, and as a connection across religious, political, and economic differences. From this perspective, opposition to vouchers does not necessarily reflect opposition to parental choice but may reflect a belief that public education serves functions that cannot be reduced to an individual tuition benefit.

The lesson for Ohio is not that a voucher referendum would necessarily produce the same result. Ohio has not held an equivalent statewide vote, and the political and constitutional context differs from those of Kentucky, Nebraska, and Colorado. The comparison demonstrates that voucher expansion remains publicly contestable, even in politically conservative states, and that public opinion may depend on how the issue is framed. "School choice" can sound like an expansion of freedom. "Public funding for private education" asks voters to consider who pays, which institutions benefit, and what obligations accompany the receipt of public money. The ballot-box defeats show that, once the policy is made concrete, the political appeal of vouchers may be less secure than legislative expansion alone would suggest.

For some voters, support for public education is a line in the sand. It is a value that they maintain, regardless of their political affiliation or their chosen candidate's ideology. Some issues are simply not up for debate. This was not something I (Emma) learned through classes on educational policy or political science. I learned it at home from my devout, Republican father who, despite recent support for vouchers and school choice by the Republican party, believes that private education should not receive funding at the expense of public education.

A Line in the Sand: Family, Politics, and Public Education

I (Emma) grew up in northern Kentucky on the outskirts of Boone County. During my childhood, the area was relatively rural. We did not have many neighbors, and nearly all of those were affiliated with the traditionalist Catholic community. They tend to hold conservative views on most issues, including education. I spent much of my childhood around this community, hours spent playing with the children who lived next door. Notably, all 11 of the children who grew up next door to my childhood home were either homeschooled or educated in a nearby private school that shared the same traditionalist Catholic values.

My neighbors were kind people. We played together as children, their older children babysat my brother and me, and our families remain neighbors to this day. However, there was always an underlying awareness that I was distinctly different from them because I attended public school. The distinction was rarely stated outright but was present. It was clear in the way that conversations hesitated when school came up. To my neighbors, public school is too progressive and harmful to the moral and spiritual development of children.

My parents, conservative in their own ways, viewed education differently. In our area, private schools, both secular and religious, were broadly accessible. My parents deliberately chose to enroll my brother and me in public school. My father, Christopher Errgang, who is a devout Republican and enthusiastic supporter of Donald Trump, was eager to share his thoughts on this topic and has requested that I cite him by name. He rejects the idea that taxpayers should subsidize private schools, including the small, traditionalist Catholic school located less than two miles from our home. He argues that, while families are free to choose private education for their children, those who make such a decision are responsible to finance it privately and independently (C. D. Errgang, personal communication, June 16, 2026).

Growing up within these perspectives complicated assumptions I have since encountered about education and American politics. The dominant narrative regarding school choice says that conservatives naturally support vouchers and that any opposition to privatization comes from the political left. My experiences challenged this, as the strongest advocates for private education lived next door and the strongest supporters of public schools were raising me. Long before I began to study education policy and long before I filled out a ballot on Kentucky's Amendment 2, I learned that supporting public education and opposing vouchers cannot be reduced to a purely partisan issue.

In 2024, Kentuckians voted on Amendment 2, a constitutional amendment that would have allowed public education funding to follow students into private, religious, and charter schools rather than being reserved solely for public education (Collins & Goodman, 2024). Kentucky, a traditionally conservative, right-leaning state, did not pass the Amendment. I was proud to vote against Amendment 2. The coalition against Amendment 2 was not liberal or conservative, nor was it Democrat or Republican. It included progressive voters like me and conservative voters like my father, who believe that choosing private education is a right but not something that should be funded at the expense of public education.

Private Choice and Public Obligations

Emma's account of growing up in Kentucky gives a personal form to the political tension identified by Brewer (2025). Her father's position does not fit comfortably within the usual partisan framing of school choice. He supports the right of families to choose private or religious education, but he does not believe that this private decision creates an obligation for the public to finance it. That distinction is central to understanding why voucher resistance can cross ideological lines. The disagreement is not between people who support parental freedom and people who oppose it. Rather, it is a disagreement over whether individual freedom creates a claim on shared public resources.

This distinction also helps clarify what was at stake in Kentucky's Amendment 2. The Amendment was not a referendum on whether private schools should exist, whether religious families should educate their children according to their beliefs, or whether parents should be permitted to leave the public-school system. Those rights were already available. The question was whether the State constitution should be changed to permit public education funds to support schooling outside the public system (Collins & Goodman, 2024). Voters could, therefore, support private education as a personal option while rejecting the proposition that the State should subsidize that choice.

Labaree's (1997) distinction between the public and private purposes of education is helpful here. Education produces individual benefits, including credentials, employment opportunities, and social mobility, but it also produces public benefits by preparing citizens, sustaining communities, and supporting democratic institutions. Voucher debates often emphasize the private side of this relationship. Families are positioned as consumers, schools as providers, and public funding as a resource that should follow individual preference. The public purposes of education become less visible. Yet the Kentucky vote suggests that many people continue to understand public schooling as more than one provider in an educational marketplace. They view it as a public institution to which the State and community hold a distinct responsibility in supporting democratic values, critical thinking, and the development of knowledgeable citizens.

Emma's personal narrative complicates the assumption that support for public schools is only a progressive or urban position. Her childhood community included strong advocates for private religious education, but her conservative parents deliberately chose public schools. Her father's opposition to vouchers is not rooted in hostility toward religion or private education but in a boundary between public and private responsibility. That boundary helps explain why voucher proposals can divide conservative voters. Fiscal restraint, local control, community loyalty, and concern about public subsidies may lead some conservative voters to oppose policies promoted by conservative legislators.

Choice Rhetoric

The word choice, by design, is doing significant work in the school voucher debate. For decades, voucher advocates have based their advocacy in the language of freedom, as in the freedom for parents to make decisions on their child's education. Such language is not neutral, as freedom is one of the most potent words in American politics. Freedom is an integral part of our nation's identity as the land of the free; notions of freedom are the cornerstone of American, patriotic identity. However, within America's current political climate, patriotism has been claimed by the political right. To label a policy as a matter of freedom is to assign to it a conservative identity. This results in any opposition to such a policy being perceived as an opposition to freedom, or to America itself.

In the *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (Dans & Groves, 2023), more commonly known as Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation's conservative policy agenda exhibits a clear understanding of this dynamic. Its chapter on the Department of Education calls for "education freedom" rather than education vouchers (p. 320). The vocabulary found within Project 2025 is intentional. It has been carefully chosen to place vouchers within a tradition of American liberty rather than within a financial debate.

The rhetoric of freedom and choice assumes that choice is given solely to the families choosing the school. This is not true as voucher programs allow schools to choose students just as much as they allow families to choose schools. As one education researcher explained, "the students are selecting schools, and the schools are selecting students" and unlike public schools, private schools are generally permitted to turn students away (Harris & Oliver, as cited in Stone & Stephens, 2026). Private schools can maintain admission standards, conduct interviews, and apply religious or behavioral criteria that would be considered discriminatory in public schools. Several independent private schools are either unable or unwilling to accommodate students with individualized education programs (IEPs) or disabilities, place parental commitment requirements that marginalize low-income families, or forbid pregnant or parenting teenagers from enrolling (Kahlenberg et al., 2016; Stein, 2024). Voucher programs fail to reach the most disadvantaged or vulnerable students. Ohio is not immune from this issue. A February 10, 2026, blog post on "voucher moguls" clearly communicates the reality.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

02.10.2026

Voucher moguls have cleverly convinced a large segment of the population of this nation that "school choice" means that parents choose. NOT SO!

By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

Private schools typically have had a customary or traditional CONSTITUENCY. The traditional constituencies of the Catholic schools are children of that faith tradition. Same with other faith groups. Others might desire enrollment in those schools, but the school chooses. Parents do not! In today's private school marketplace, poor kids are typically excluded from private education because of inability to pay the tuition, even with a tax voucher. A private school might wish to waive part of the tuition for the poor kid but that is the school's choice.

As Phillis explains, low-income students are frequently left behind due to an inability to cover tuition expenses, even with a voucher. Schools might lack the necessary education support services, or even the desire, to admit them. The Ohio appellate court heard arguments on this matter in May 2025. Deputy Solicitor General, Stephen Carney, was pressed on the question of whether notions of "choice" exist when private schools decide which students they admit, and Carney admitted that the "choice" being offered was simply being able to submit an application (Trau, 2026). Another judge probed further, asking: "What's the purpose, counselor, of having an admission policy where students who can afford private tuition to private schools are nonetheless subsidized by EdChoice vouchers? What is the governmental purpose of that?" Carney replied, "Well, it's to provide a choice to parents" (Trau, 2026). This sheds light on the weak nature of the choice argument. Being permitted to apply for something is not synonymous with the ability to obtain it. Ohio families have always had the right to apply for private schools, so the obstacle at hand has never been the application itself. Rather, the obstacle has been cost and selectivity. EdChoice eliminates neither of those obstacles for Ohioans.

Litigation as Democratic Resistance

Litigation is often treated as a technical legal process separate from the public life of schools and communities. In the Ohio voucher debate, however, the Vouchers Hurt Ohio litigation functions as a courtroom challenge and as a form of democratic resistance. When public-school districts, advocacy organizations, legal actors, educators, and community stakeholders turn to the courts, they are not simply asking judges to resolve a narrow legal question. They are challenging the State's decision to expand private-school subsidies while public-school communities continue to argue that Ohio has not fully met its obligation to the public system.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

12.17.2025

Four amicus curiae briefs representing 17 organizations have been filed in the 10th District Court of Appeals in support of the Coalition/Vouchers Hurt Ohio (VHO)

By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

A listing of the amicus curiae briefs filed in support of the Coalition/Vouchers Hurt Ohio (VHO) is below.

Brief of Amicus Curiae Ohio Advocacy and Legal Services Organizations in Support of Appellees/Cross-Appellants

- Legal Aid of Southeast and Central Ohio
- The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland
- Community Legal Aid Services Inc.
- Advocates for Basic Legal Equality Inc.
- The Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati
- The Legal Aid Society of Southwest Ohio, LLC
- Legal Aid of Western Ohio
- Disability Rights Ohio
- The Ohio Poverty Law Center

Brief of Amici Curiae Ohio Federation of Teachers & Ohio Education Association in Support of Appellees/Cross-Appellants

- Ohio Federation of Teachers (OFT)
- Ohio Education Association (OEA)

Brief of Amici Curiae Ohio School Boards Association, Buckeye Association of School Administrators and Ohio Association of School Business Officials in Support of Plaintiffs Appellees/Cross-Appellants

- Ohio School Boards Association (OSBA)
- Buckeye Association of School Administrators (BASA)
- Ohio Association of School Business Officials (OASBO)

Brief of Amici Curiae Public Funds Public Schools, Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates, and Honesty for Ohio Education in Support of Appellees/Cross-Appellants

- Public Funds Public Schools (PFPS)
- Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA)
- Honesty for Ohio Education

The breadth of support for the Vouchers Hurt Ohio! case illustrates that opposition to Ohio's voucher program extends beyond individual school districts and includes a broad coalition of organizations concerned with educational equity, public accountability, disability rights, poverty, and the constitutional obligations of the State to fund public education. Their participation suggests that concerns about voucher expansion are not confined to a single stakeholder group. Rather, the litigation has become a focal point for a broad network of organizations that view public education as a public responsibility deserving constitutional protection and public accountability.

That detail matters because it shows that the lawsuit is not isolated to one district, one legal team, or one political perspective. Rather, the case has become a site where different public-school constituencies gather around a shared concern: whether the State can continue directing public funds toward private education while maintaining its responsibility to public schools. In this way, litigation becomes a public forum for contesting the meaning of public education, public obligation, and public accountability. The amicus briefs themselves serve as evidence of coalition-building, demonstrating how legal challenges can mobilize organizations that might otherwise operate in separate policy arenas.

The May 2026 appellate hearing demonstrates how litigation brings competing assumptions into public view. According to reporting amplified in Phillis's blog coverage, the State argued that there is "no inherent connection" between EdChoice funding and public-school funding. That claim is central to the State's defense because it attempts to separate voucher spending from the funding of public schools. Public school advocates reject that separation. They argue that, when public dollars are appropriated for private school tuition, it is connected to the State's broader constitutional and fiscal obligations. This aligns with education policy scholarship that treats public schooling as an individual service *and* as a public institution tied to democratic governance, collective investment, and public accountability (Johnson, 2022). Voucher spending cannot be understood only as a benefit to individual families but must be evaluated in relation to the public system it reshapes.

The court case is about both whether EdChoice survives a legal challenge and who may define the relationship between public funds and public responsibility. Voucher supporters frame EdChoice using the language of choice, opportunity, and parental empowerment as an individual benefit for each family. Public school advocates frame it as a systemic decision with consequences for districts, taxpayers, and the public infrastructure of education. Research on voucher advocacy shows that these frames are not neutral. Lubienski and Malin (2021) argue that voucher advocates have changed arguments over time, especially when claims about academic achievement became difficult to sustain. Johnson (2022) shows that school choice rhetoric can direct attention away from collective community power and toward individualized exit. Litigation forces those competing frames into the open and requires the State to defend the idea that private school subsidies can be treated as separate from public school funding, while opponents argue that the two are inseparable within Ohio's education system.

Understanding litigation as democratic resistance does not require assuming that the courts will end voucher expansion. Even before a final decision is reached, the litigation has already served as a mechanism for coalition formation and public engagement, bringing together organizations that represent educators, parents, school leaders, legal advocates, and community stakeholders. Litigation is one shoreline where the tide of voucher expansion meets public resistance. It marks a moment when public school advocates refuse to treat voucher growth as inevitable and instead insist that the State's choices be tested against public obligation, constitutional duty, and democratic accountability.

Accountability Campaigns as Public Resistance

If litigation brings voucher resistance into the courtroom, accountability campaigns bring that resistance into the community. Public school advocates argue that opposition to voucher expansion cannot rely solely on constitutional claims, legal filings, or broad critiques of privatization because those arguments may appear abstract to families and taxpayers. Accountability campaigns seek to make the consequences of voucher expansion visible by showing where public dollars go, how voucher spending affects local districts, and why public funding should require public oversight.

The Voucher Accountability Project is a prominent example of this strategy. Launched by a coalition of Ohio public-school advocates, the project provides district-level fact sheets and public-facing resources designed to help communities understand how voucher funding compares with public-school funding. The project includes fact sheets for nearly every public school district in Ohio, allowing residents to examine how state voucher expenditures affect their local schools and communities (Millard, 2026). Honesty for Ohio Education describes the initiative as an effort to educate Ohioans about private-school vouchers and provide tools to help citizens "keep public funds public" (Honesty for Ohio Education, n.d.a, para. 2). This framing is significant because it presents accountability not merely as a fiscal concern but as a democratic one: Taxpayers should be able to see, question, and evaluate how public education dollars are spent.

Honesty for Ohio Education's (n.d.b) *Voucher Toolkit* identifies partners—educators, parents, civic organizations, policy researchers, and community advocates—that reflect a broad strategy within the anti-voucher movement to demand transparency and accountability. Rather than allowing voucher debates to be framed exclusively by parental choice, these campaigns encourage communities to ask different questions: Who is accountable for public dollars? What standards apply to private schools receiving public funds? How much money is being directed toward private-school tuition? And what are the consequences for the public schools that continue to educate the majority of Ohio students?

The political response to the Voucher Accountability Project demonstrates why these questions matter. In a June 22, 2026, blog post, Mr. Phillis reproduced a statement from an Ohio senator who argued that, before launching a voucher accountability campaign, advocates should first hold the public-school system accountable. Mr. Phillis responded by contrasting that claim with the extensive oversight already applied to public schools.

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

6.22.2026

An outspoken, prominent Ohio Senator in a recent Facebook post responded negatively to a proposal to hold private schools accountable.

By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

Here is the blather he used to introduce his rant:

> Before launching a "Voucher Accountability Project," perhaps we should start by holding accountable the public school system that educates the vast majority of Ohio students and receives the overwhelming majority of education funding.

This Senator, a few years ago called public education "socialism" and said that education should be privatized. He has chaired the House Education Committee and now chairs the Senate Education Committee. He should have learned that public schools are held accountable to the nth degree; but he says that the public school system should be held accountable.

Public school district finances are audited by the State. Public schools issue report cards. Public schools are subject to public records requests.

Public schools are operated by elected school board members who are held accountable by school patrons.

Public schools are subjected to thousands of other mandates not applicable to private schools; yet, this fine Senator says, "start by holding accountable the public system." Does this mean that he would agree to a state policy that would hold private schools accountable in the same way public schools are?

This Senator is a leader in the Ohio Senate. No wonder this state has operated an unconstitutional system of common schools for 3 decades, scrapped the Cupp/Patterson Fair School Funding Plan, and driven the State school system to the brink of financial collapse.

Ohio public school students depend on the Ohio legislature for the kind of educational programming that prepares them for citizenship and a successful life. The legislative leadership is failing Ohio public school students.

Phillis's post is openly argumentative, and its tone reflects the frustration of an advocate who believes lawmakers are applying different standards to public and private education. Its importance to this chapter, however, extends beyond the criticism of one legislator. The exchange illustrates a recurring strategy within voucher debates. When advocates call for greater oversight of private schools receiving public funds, voucher supporters may respond by shifting the discussion back toward the performance or funding of public schools. That response does not directly answer the question raised by the Voucher Accountability Project. Public school accountability and private school accountability are not mutually exclusive. Evidence of problems within public education does not resolve whether private institutions accepting public dollars should be subject to comparable standards of transparency and public review.

The Senator's statement reveals a difference in how accountability is being defined. In the quoted response, accountability appears to mean improving the performance of public schools or questioning the amount of money they receive. The Voucher Accountability Project uses the term differently. It focuses on the public's ability to identify where voucher funds are going, evaluate the obligations attached to those funds, and compare the oversight of publicly governed schools with that of private voucher recipients. These are related but distinct questions. One concerns whether schools produce satisfactory outcomes. The other concerns whether institutions receiving public money remain visible and answerable to the public.

Phillis identifies several mechanisms of public school oversight, including financial audits, public report cards, public-records requirements, and governance by elected school boards. These mechanisms do not guarantee public schools always use resources effectively or achieve equitable outcomes. They do, however, create formal channels for members of the public to obtain information, question decisions, vote for governing officials, and demand corrective action. The accountability argument advanced by voucher critics is that private schools receiving public funds do not necessarily operate within the same structure of public governance. The concern is, therefore, not that private schools operate without any rules, but that the relationship between public funding and public authority becomes weaker when funds move into privately governed institutions.

This distinction should be stated carefully. Accountability varies by program design and state law, and private schools participating in voucher programs may be subject to testing, reporting, financial, health, safety, or accreditation requirements. However, they generally remain privately governed institutions rather than public bodies controlled by elected boards and fully subject to the same public-records, open-meetings, admissions, and transparency requirements as public school districts. The concern raised by accountability campaigns is not simply that the rules are different. It is whether the level of public oversight is sufficient for the amount of public money being distributed and the public purposes that the funding is intended to serve.

The political reaction described by Mr. Phillis demonstrates that accountability campaigns are not neutral information projects. They challenge the existing terms of the voucher debate by making spending patterns visible and asking lawmakers to defend differences in oversight. District-level fact sheets can transform a statewide policy into a local question. A resident may have little connection to an abstract debate over EdChoice, but they may respond differently when presented with information about voucher expenditures associated with the community in which they live. The campaign's power lies in this translation from state policy to local consequence.

The disagreement also exposes an important tension in the language of public funding. Voucher supporters may argue that private schools should retain their independence because families choose them precisely as alternatives to the public system. Yet the acceptance of public funds complicates the claim to complete institutional independence. Once public money supports private-school tuition, taxpayers have a legitimate interest in understanding how that money is used and what obligations accompany it. The central accountability question is, therefore, not whether private schools should become identical to public schools. It is whether public funding can be separated from meaningful public responsibility.

Research and policy analysis on vouchers have repeatedly raised concerns about the relationship between public funding and institutional oversight. Carnoy (2017) argues that voucher expansion has often moved ahead of convincing evidence that such programs reliably improve student achievement. Lubienski et al. (2023) further show how voucher advocacy can shift its objectives when earlier claims become difficult to sustain. Together, this work suggests that public scrutiny becomes especially important when programs expand despite mixed evidence and changing justifications. Accountability campaigns respond to that concern by asking policymakers and the public to evaluate not only the promises attached to vouchers, but also the structures through which public money is distributed and monitored.

The Voucher Accountability Project also extends the coalition-building visible in the Vouchers Hurt Ohio litigation. Vouchers Hurt Ohio (n.d.) describes itself as a "growing coalition of public school districts" (para. 1) challenging Ohio's private-school voucher program and reports that more than 300 districts have joined the effort. Whereas the lawsuit asks courts to determine whether Ohio's voucher system violates constitutional obligations to public education, the accountability campaign asks communities to evaluate whether voucher spending is transparent, equitable, and publicly defensible. The two strategies address different audiences, but they reinforce one another. Litigation produces legal arguments and an official record. Accountability campaigns translate those arguments into public information, local comparisons, and questions that residents can bring to legislators, school-board meetings, and elections.

These campaigns represent a distinct form of pushback by the body politic. They do not replace litigation, nor do they substitute for direct voter action. Instead, they create the conditions for broader participation by making voucher spending more visible and understandable. The sharp political response to the Voucher Accountability Project itself is evidence that such visibility matters. By asking who receives public money, what standards accompany it, and who has the authority to demand answers, accountability campaigns challenge the assumption that voucher expansion is merely a private transaction between a family and a school. They reveal it as a public policy choice with consequences for taxpayers, public institutions, and democratic governance.

Turning Resistance into Democratic Power

Together, the ballot campaigns, personal narratives, legal challenges, and accountability projects reveal that resistance to vouchers is neither singular nor confined to one political institution. Voters can reject constitutional amendments or repeal voucher-style laws. Courts can require states to defend the relationship between private school subsidies and their obligations to public education. Educators and school leaders can organize through professional associations and amicus briefs. Advocacy coalitions can transform state budget data into district-level information that communities can understand. Families can challenge the assumption that support for private choice requires support for public subsidy. Each form of resistance operates differently, but each contests the idea that voucher expansion is inevitable or democratically settled.

This resistance is strongest when legal, fiscal, political, and personal arguments are connected. Constitutional language may feel distant from the daily experiences of families. Fiscal data alone may not explain why public schools matter as civic institutions. Personal stories can create emotional understanding, but they require research and public data to demonstrate that individual experiences reflect broader policy concerns. The emerging anti-voucher movement in Ohio appears to be building these connections. The Vouchers Hurt Ohio litigation provides a legal framework. The amicus coalition demonstrates institutional breadth. The Voucher Accountability Project translates public finance into local evidence. Stories from Kentucky and research on rural conservatives show that the defense of public schools can cross familiar political divisions.

The evidence suggests that voucher advocates and opponents begin with different ideas about the nature of education. Voucher policy emphasizes education as an individual good, a service selected by families and financed according to individual preference. Opponents do not deny that education produces private benefits or that families have legitimate interests in choosing schools. Their concern is that an education system organized primarily around individual exit may weaken the institutions through which the public governs, funds, and shares responsibility for schooling. Johnson (2022) describes this tension as one of community disempowerment, in which individualized choice can direct attention away from collective control over public institutions. The dispute is not only over the effectiveness of vouchers but over whether public education should remain a shared institution or become one option within a publicly subsidized marketplace.

This distinction should shape how public-school advocates communicate. Opposition to vouchers is unlikely to succeed if it is framed as opposition to parents or to the desire for better educational opportunities. Families who pursue private education may be responding to genuine concerns, and public schools are not beyond criticism. The stronger argument is that individual dissatisfaction does not remove the State's obligation to sustain an accessible, accountable, and adequately supported public system. Public schools can and must improve, but improvement requires public investment and democratic participation rather than the gradual transfer of responsibility to private institutions.

The tide, then, is not turning because voucher expansion has ended. In Ohio, vouchers remain politically powerful, and their supporters continue to influence legislation and public debate. The tide is turning because the movement is encountering organized resistance across multiple sites. That resistance appears in election results, court briefs, district fact sheets, coalition meetings, family conversations, and public demands for transparency. None of these alone guarantees that voucher expansion will be reversed. Together, however, they demonstrate that the future of public education remains open to democratic contestation.

The central question is whether these separate acts of resistance can become durable public power. Ballot victories can stop individual proposals, but they must be connected to sustained public education. Litigation can challenge constitutional violations, but it must be accompanied by organizing that gives the legal claims public meaning. Accountability campaigns can make voucher spending visible, but visibility must lead to public deliberation and political action. The tide does not turn at a single moment. It turns through the accumulation of pressure, the coordination of institutions, and the refusal of communities to accept privatization as inevitable. In Ohio and elsewhere, that process is already underway.

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Chapter 7

Don't Throw the Baby Out with the Bathwater
The Downstream Impacts

By *Jessica S. Palatka*

There are moments in leadership when a decision appears logical in isolation but troubling when viewed across time. A budget reduction balances an account. A restructuring improves efficiency. A program is replaced by something new and seemingly better. Yet years later, the consequences emerge in places no one anticipated. What once seemed expendable is revealed to have been essential. As I reflect on Ohio's evolving education landscape through my experiences in human resources and organizational leadership, I find myself returning to a simple question: What are we at risk of losing in the pursuit of reform? The debate surrounding school vouchers is often framed as a matter of parental choice and educational opportunity. Those questions matter. However, they are not the only questions that matter. Public schools and public universities form a connected system that develops talent, strengthens communities, and supports the workforce upon which Ohio's future depends. This chapter explores the downstream implications of educational policy decisions and argues that, in our efforts to improve education, we must be careful not to discard the very institutions that continue to serve the common good.

Public Education, Human Capital, and the Ohio Workforce: The Impacts of Voucher Expansion

The debate over Ohio's expanding voucher system is often framed as questions of choice and opportunity. While these considerations are important, they do not fully capture the broader implications of diverting public resources from public education. Too often, discussions of school choice focus on individual students and families while overlooking the interconnected educational ecosystem that supports Ohio's communities, workforce, and economy. This chapter argues that public schools and public universities are not separate systems but components of a single human capital development pipeline that prepares the teachers, nurses, engineers, healthcare professionals, public servants, and business leaders upon whom the State depends.

From a human capital perspective, public education represents more than a service purchased by individual families; it is a public investment that produces collective benefits. Public schools serve as community anchors, major employers, centers of civic engagement, and primary educational institutions for the overwhelming majority of Ohio's children. Public universities build on that foundation by preparing future professionals, conducting research, and supporting regional economic development. Education should be understood not only as a private benefit but also as a public good that generates social, economic, and civic returns for society (Kang, 2022). The benefits of a well-educated population extend far beyond students and parents, affecting employers, taxpayers, communities, and future generations.

The expansion of vouchers raises important questions about how Ohio allocates public resources and what may be lost when policy conversations focus primarily on individual choice. Research on voucher programs suggests that educational outcomes are often mixed and that policymakers must consider broader system-level effects, including impacts on public institutions, resource allocation, and educational equity (Epple et al., 2017; McEwan, 2000). Similarly, Grubb and Allen (2011) remind us that educational investments should be evaluated not only by short-term outcomes but also by their long-term contributions to workforce development and societal well-being.

The central concern explored in this chapter is not whether educational reform is necessary. Public institutions, like all institutions, should continually evolve and improve. Rather, the concern is that, in the pursuit of educational choice, Ohio may overlook the broader public benefits generated by its public education system. The downstream consequences of weakened public investment may include teacher shortages, workforce gaps, diminished community capacity, and reduced economic competitiveness. In seeking to improve education, policymakers risk throwing out the baby with the bath water, discarding the public good that benefits all Ohioans while attempting to address perceived shortcomings within the system.

Ultimately, this chapter contends that the voucher debate is not simply an educational issue. It is a workforce issue, an economic development issue, and a public policy issue that affects every Ohioan, regardless of whether they currently have children enrolled in school. Understanding these downstream impacts is essential if Ohio hopes to sustain the educational infrastructure necessary to support its future workforce and its long-term prosperity.

Don't Throw Out the Baby with the Bath Water: Reform, Loss, and Public Value in Education Policy

The idiom, "Don't Throw Out the Baby with the Bathwater," is often treated as a simple warning against overcorrection. Though popularly attributed to medieval bathing practices in which entire families reused the same bathwater, its contemporary meaning is more relevant to policy discourse: It cautions against sweeping reforms that eliminate valuable systems in the process of addressing perceived inefficiencies or failures. In educational policy, this idiom becomes particularly salient when reforms seek to address inequities or inefficiencies while risking unintended consequences for the broader system of public education.

Within Ohio's ongoing school choice debate, the "baby" and the "bathwater" are defined in fundamentally different ways depending on one's policy orientation, reflecting deeper disagreements about whether education should be understood primarily as a private good or a public good. From the perspective of voucher supporters, the traditional public school system is often framed as the "bathwater," a centralized structure perceived as inefficient, bureaucratic, and uneven in performance. In this framing, the "baby" is student opportunity, parental empowerment, and academic achievement. Proponents argue that expanded educational choice improves outcomes through competition and flexibility. Studies cited in policy discussions, including Urban Institute (2023) analyses of Ohio's EdChoice program, have reported higher rates of college enrollment and completion among some voucher participants compared to public school peers. Additionally, advocates argue that competitive pressures may incentivize traditional public schools to innovate and improve performance, thereby, strengthening the overall education marketplace. Some also suggest that voucher participation has the potential to reduce racial isolation in certain contexts by increasing cross-sector enrollment patterns.

However, research in the economics and sociology of education complicates these claims. As Epple et al. (2017) note in their comprehensive review of voucher literature, the effects of school choice programs are highly variable and depend on implementation design, market structure, and regulatory context. Similarly, McEwan (2000) highlights that large-scale voucher systems can produce unintended system-level effects, including stratification and uneven access, even when individual student outcomes appear positive. Kang (2022) further emphasizes that education functions not only as a private benefit consumed by families but also as a public good that generates broad social and economic returns. From this perspective, policy must be evaluated not only in terms of individual achievement gains but also in terms of its effects on institutional stability and collective welfare.

Critics of Ohio's voucher expansion argue that policymakers risk discarding the "baby" itself, the public education system that serves the vast majority of Ohio students, in efforts to correct "perceived" deficiencies in specific districts. They point to the expansion of universal voucher eligibility and the growing fiscal implications for public school districts as evidence of systemic reallocation of resources. In most cases, vouchers are awarded to students already enrolled in private schools, raising concerns about the efficiency and equity of public expenditures. Critics also highlight geographic disparities, noting that rural and small-town districts often have limited access to private schooling options, meaning that public funds are increasingly redirected away from the very communities most dependent on public schools.

The downstream effects of this structural shift extend beyond K-12 schooling and into Ohio's broader workforce ecosystem. Public school districts, already responsible for educating approximately 90 percent of the State's students, face increasing fiscal pressure that can result in staffing reductions, program cuts, and diminished professional development opportunities. These pressures directly affect the educator workforce pipeline, including the preparation and retention of teachers who are largely trained in Ohio's public universities.

Grubb and Allen (2011) argue that educational resources must be understood as long-term investments in human capital rather than short-term expenditures. Reductions in public education funding have cumulative effects on workforce development capacity, particularly in fields such as education, healthcare, and technical trades where public institutions play a central training role. As school districts adjust to fiscal constraints, disparities in working conditions between public and private school settings may also contribute to labor market fragmentation, including differences in compensation, accountability structures, and professional supports.

At the community level, critics raise concerns about the interaction between school funding and local property taxation. Because Ohio's public school system relies heavily on local levies, reductions in state-level support can increase pressure on local taxpayers to maintain services. Over time, this dynamic may contribute to uneven economic development patterns, particularly in districts where declining enrollment and constrained resources intersect with rising fiscal demands.

The tension in Ohio's education policy landscape centers on whether the expansion of school choice represents an effective enhancement of individual opportunity or a broader structural shift that risks weakening the infrastructure responsible for producing the State's long-term human capital. The idiom serves as a cautionary frame: In addressing inefficiencies within the system, policymakers must remain attentive to the possibility that what is being removed is not merely "bathwater" but the foundational institutional capacity upon which Ohio's workforce and civic life depend.

School Choice, Fiscal Policy, and the Common Good: Synthesizing Ohio Education Policy Narratives

The Ohio Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding (Ohio E&A) daily blog posts construct a sustained argument about the public value of education in Ohio. While each post addresses a distinct policy issue within the State's school choice landscape, together they reveal a consistent underlying concern: that Ohio's expansion of voucher-based education may weaken the institutional foundations of public schooling and, by extension, the broader workforce and civic infrastructure that depend upon it. This section synthesizes five representative blog posts that illuminate the economic, philosophical, and human capital dimensions of this debate.

Across these posts, a central interpretive frame emerges: Public education is not merely a service consumed by individual families, but a public good that generates collective returns. This framing aligns directly with Kang's (2022) assertion that education must be understood as both a private benefit and a public investment, as well as with Grubb and Allen's (2011) argument that educational resources function as long-term human capital investments with broad societal implications. The blog posts examined here collectively reinforce this perspective by emphasizing downstream impacts that extend beyond immediate student outcomes.

Public Schools as Community and Economic Infrastructure

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

03.31.2025

Some rural areas have no private schools and thus few vouchers. Some legislative leaders want taxpayer money for private school facilities so as to create a demand for vouchers in rural areas.

By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

Historically, the public common school has been the center of community life in most districts throughout Ohio and the nation. The public school system in many districts has been the economic engine of the community. In the past, small town mayors and village councils typically resisted consolidation of school districts for reasons of the local economy.

Some voucher-centric legislators want to provide funding to private schools to build facilities and eliminate the public school as the community center.

Rural legislators are under pressure to support vouchers from legislative leaders who are bent on privatizing public education. Rural legislators should ponder the consequences of fragmenting rural communities by using tax funds for vouchers and private school facilities. Of course, the voucher-hungry leaders will put out the threat of competition in primary elections when rural legislators protect the public common school.

Rural legislators would be wise to bond together along with their respective communities to protect the public common school system. Voucher students do not perform academically as well as their peers in the common school system. These voucher students lose more ground each year they are enrolled as a voucher student in private school.

The above post centers on the role of public schools as foundational institutions in rural communities and asserts that "the public common school has been the center of community life" and describes public schools as "the economic engine of the community." This situates public education an academic institution and as a form of civic and economic infrastructure. In rural Ohio, schools function as major employers, community hubs, and stabilizing institutions that support population retention and economic vitality. When policy discussions emphasize parental choice without accounting for geographic disparities in private school access, they risk overlooking the structural dependence of many communities on public education systems.

This aligns with McEwan's (2000) analysis of voucher programs, which cautions that system-wide effects can emerge when market mechanisms are introduced into education systems without accounting for local variation. The above post argues that educational policy framed around individual choice may weaken institutions that sustain rural economic and social life. From a human capital perspective, the post underscores the fact that workforce development in rural Ohio is inseparable from the health of public schools. When schools decline, so does the local capacity to produce and retain skilled workers, reinforcing cycles of economic stagnation and population loss.

Fiscal Reallocation and Workforce System Effects

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

04.17.2024

The $1 billion universal private school voucher program diverts $1 billion away from public school districts annually, thus, in the range of $200,000,000 will be lost to the State Teachers Retirement System (STRS).
By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

School districts pay 14% of teachers' salaries into STRS and teachers, likewise, pay 14% of their salaries into STRS.

STRS has, in recent months, signaled that the current percentage of salaries from school boards and teachers paid into STRS is insufficient. The universal voucher law will exacerbate this problem for STRS. $1 billion dollars diverted from public school districts to private schools renders $200 million less for STRS. Other public retirement systems will be harmed.

Attached is a calculation of the Executive Director, Robin Rayfield, of the Ohio Retired Teachers Association (ORTA) from which the above number of $200,000,000 was derived.

1. I calculated the annual budget for a given district. We did several districts urban, rural, and suburban. Selected at random using the Cupp report.
2. I looked at the annual amount spent on salaries listed on the Cupp report. The average of the schools was about 80%. Some districts less, some greater than 80% of their annual budget. I selected 80% as an average.
3. Of that 80% spent on people in each district, about 70% went towards certificated personnel (STRS contributors), and 30% went towards non certificated personnel. The 'wild card' here is that many schools spend money on purchased services people (ESC and other hired certificated staff). I have no way to know that number, but from experience, I know that special ed costs to the various ESC across the State are a big number. That would inflate the number of dollars that are spent on STRS contributors.
4. Ok, so that number estimated (70% of the 80% of the total budget for public schools spent on STRS contributors) is a large number. That number represents the total salary cost of teachers, administrators and other certificated personnel.
5. That total cost of salaries is multiplied by the 14% paid by the individual and the 14% paid by the employer.
6. The 28% of that cost is about 20% (conservatively calculated) of the school's total budget. We calculated that for every dollar that goes to a public school $.22 (22 cents) is money that the STRS would have received in contributions.

I have checked this out with Ohio public school treasurers, and they have agreed with what I am proposing as the cost of vouchers to the STRS system.

The April 17 post, "$1 Billion Universal Private School Voucher Program Diverts $1 Billion Away from Public School Districts Annually," shifts the focus from community impact to fiscal and workforce consequences. The post argues that voucher expansion redirects significant public funds away from public school districts, with implications not only for classroom resources but also for broader educational workforce systems, including the State Teachers Retirement System (STRS).

This framing is particularly significant because it extends the analysis beyond immediate K–12 funding concerns and into long-term workforce sustainability. Reduced funding affects teacher recruitment, retention, compensation structures, and professional development opportunities. These factors are directly tied to the stability of Ohio's educator workforce pipeline, much of which is produced through public universities.

Grubb and Allen (2011) emphasize that educational funding decisions must be evaluated as investments in human capital rather than discrete budgetary expenditures. The April 17 post operationalizes this argument by illustrating how fiscal reallocations create second- and third-order effects across the education workforce system.

From a systems perspective, this post raises an important concern: when funding is redistributed without consideration of long-term workforce implications, the result may be a weakened or even damaged educator pipeline at precisely the moment when many districts are already experiencing teacher shortages.

Public Investment Versus Policy Retrenchment

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

05.17.2024

The Cupp/Patterson Fair School Funding Plan brought the State of Ohio to a paramount moment in Ohio history-on the cusp of fulfilling the 1851 constitutional provision for a thorough and efficient system of common schools-but…

By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

The Cupp/Patterson Fair School Funding Plan is a result of knowledgeable, highly effective superintendents and treasurers being brought together by two highly competent legislators committed to Ohio's constitutional provision to secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools.

The approach and strategies of the committed framers of the plan resulted in the framework for a constitutional system of public common schools. The approach—determine the components of a high-quality education for the various types of students, cost out those components, and develop a formula for distributing sufficient state resources to school districts to provide the identified educational components.

The finale—sufficient state funding to implement the Cupp/Patterson Fair School Funding Plan is being undermined by the nefarious universal voucher scheme. Ohio had and still has the financial resources to completely implement the Cupp/Patterson plan; however, there is one giant obstacle—the infatuation with EdChoice vouchers on the part of certain legislators.

The funding formula is not being fully funded because a billion-dollar slice of school funding is being siphoned off for the unconstitutional EdChoice voucher scheme; hence the Cupp/Patterson Fair School Funding Plan is being phased in. Districts are losing hundreds of millions each year via the phase-in strategy. The phase-in strategy has the potential of damaging the funding plan beyond repair.

There is more than one historical example of an effectual school funding plan dying on the third base.

In the mid and second half of the 1970's, Ohio commissioned a major school finance study that had the potential to meet the constitutional standard of a thorough and efficient system of common schools. The study was conducted by a prestigious group of school finance experts. The legislature adopted the plan—the Equal Yield Formula—but state officials let it die on third base. THEY PHASED IT IN—29%THE FIRST YEAR, 40% THE SECOND YEAR, 79% THE THIRD YEAR, AND THE PLAN DIED THE FOURTH YEAR.

And then in this generation, the evidence-based model of school funding was put together during the Strickland administration in the midst of the great recession. Representative Steve Dyer was a key actor in formulating this model. It was an efficacious model, but the Kasich administration dumped it and replaced it with nothing—no formula.

These valiant attempts should inform current state officials to fully fund a constitutionally required thorough and efficient system of common schools.

A few voucher zealots in the legislature have the potential to forestall the implementation of a constitutional system of common schools by their infatuation with the unconstitutional universal EdChoice voucher debacle. Sad!

The May 17 post, "The Cupp/Patterson Fair School Funding Plan Brought the State of Ohio to a Paramount Moment," provides a counterpoint to the policy critique by presenting an alternative vision of educational investment. Rather than focusing solely on the expansion of vouchers, the post highlights the Fair School Funding Plan as a mechanism for strengthening Ohio's constitutional commitment to public education.

This post is particularly important because it reframes the policy debate as a question of public investment rather than private substitution. It implicitly asks what might be achieved if Ohio fully funded its public education system rather than reallocating resources toward parallel systems of schooling.

This framing aligns with Kang's (2022) conceptualization of education as a public good that produces collective returns. It also reinforces Epple et al. (2017), which cautions that voucher systems must be evaluated in terms of system-wide efficiency and equity, not only individual outcomes. The idiom "Don't Throw Out the Baby with the Bathwater" becomes especially relevant here. The post suggests that, while public education systems may require reform, abandoning or underfunding them risks undermining the infrastructure responsible for producing Ohio's long-term workforce capacity.

Education as Public Good and Philosophical Foundation

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

01.17.2025

Dr. Samuel Kern Alexander: The common good is much more than the sum of individual preferences.

By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

Kern Alexander is a nationally recognized school finance expert. He has served as president of two universities and has served as a distinguished professor in two universities. Dr. Alexander served as an expert witness in the DeRolph school funding court case in Ohio and in several other school funding cases throughout the nation.

In his paper—The Problem With Parental Choice: Why Vouchers And Charter Schools Are Unsound Public Policy—Dr. Alexander takes a deep dive into the negative social, economic, educational, cultural, and practical implications of tax supported school choice. In terms of overall consequence, Dr. Alexander concludes that "public policy should not be formulated and the public good cannot be accomplished by the summary of parental self-interests."

The January 17 post, "Dr. Samuel Kern Alexander: The Common Good Is Much More Than the Sum of Individual Preferences," provides the philosophical foundation for the broader argument. The post directly engages the tension between education as a private good and education as a public good, asserting that public education cannot be reduced to aggregated individual preferences.

This framing aligns closely with Kang's (2022) argument that education generates societal benefits beyond individual consumption. It also resonates with broader public finance literature that emphasizes collective returns on educational investment.

Within the context of the blog corpus, this post functions as an interpretive anchor. It reframes the entire voucher debate as a question of democratic and economic philosophy. It asks whether education is fundamentally a shared society investment or a market-based commodity.

The "baby" in this idiom is both the school funding or institutional structure and the concept of the common good itself. The "bathwater" is inefficiency, bureaucracy, and uneven performance. Reform efforts that fail to distinguish between the two risk eliminating essential public value alongside legitimate areas for improvement.

Public Education and National Economic Competitiveness

OHIO COALITION FOR EQUITY & ADEQUACY OF SCHOOL FUNDING BLOG POST

07.15.2025

Some politicians are afraid of the efficacy of the public common school.
By William Phillis, Consultant, Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding

Even though there has typically been only a modicum of financial support from the State level across America, the public common school has a marvelous record of success. Without the public common school, the financial well-being of Americans and the well-placed position of the nation in world leadership would not have been accomplished. Without the common school, the freedoms enjoyed by our fellow countrymen would never have survived.

The public common school enjoyed a continuing healthy dose of political support and at least a modicum of financial support until the doom heaped on the system by the dishonest, deceitful, duplicitous A Nation at Risk report issued by the Reagan administration in 1983. Subsequent to that intentionally hostile, malicious report, the vicious attacks on the public common school system from the politician establishment have continued for more than four decades. Federal and state policies, in the name of "reform," have eroded the capacity of the system to produce more excellent results.

The private sector has aided and abetted the political assault on the public common school system. Public education funds are being transferred to the private sector through charters, vouchers, and other private venues at an alarming rate.

Some politicians favor the privatization of public education due to campaign contributions being freely available from the private sector. These politicians know that the private sector will, in some cases, shortchange students to gain more profit and in other cases, expand their religious or philosophical outreach to the detriment of the education of students both in the public and private sector. The ECOT online charter school debacle is a prime example of politicians protecting corruption in the private education sector.

Additionally, some autocratic-oriented politicians want to dumb down the population as a means of reducing resistance to their nefarious policies. Hence, they fear the efficacy of the public common school system. Those who are educated in a well-funded public common school system have the capacity to resist the autocrats.

The July 15 post expands the argument to national and economic scales. It asserts that without the public common school system the financial well-being of Americans and the global leadership position of the United States would not have been achieved.

This framing situates public education as a foundational driver of economic development, workforce readiness, and democratic stability. It extends the implications of the previous posts by explicitly linking educational infrastructure to macroeconomic outcomes.

From a human capital perspective, this argument is consistent with Grubb and Allen's (2011) emphasis on education as a long-term investment in societal capacity. It also reflects McEwan's (2000) concern that large-scale structural changes in education systems can produce unintended consequences that extend beyond immediate academic outcomes.

The implication is clear: Public education is not merely a service for families with school-aged children. It is a foundational institution that supports national competitiveness, workforce development, and civic stability. When this system is weakened, the effects are distributed across the entire population, not only those directly enrolled in schools.

Downstream Impacts and the Human Capital Ecosystem

Together, these five blog posts construct a coherent narrative about the role of public education as a multidimensional public good and emphasize that schools are simultaneously economic engines, workforce development systems, community anchors, and democratic institutions. Across all five posts, a consistent concern emerges: that policy discussions centered on individual choice may obscure the systemic consequences of reallocating resources away from public education. These consequences include weakened teacher pipelines, reduced fiscal stability in districts, increased geographic inequality, and diminished long-term workforce capacity.

This synthesis aligns with Kang's (2022) argument that education must be understood through both private and public lenses, and with Epple et al.'s (2017) emphasis on system-level effects in voucher programs. It also reinforces Grubb and Allen's (2011) conceptualization of education as a long-term human capital investment requiring sustained public commitment.

Ultimately, the blog posts collectively support the central claim of this chapter: that Ohio's education policy decisions must be evaluated not only in terms of immediate individual outcomes, but also in terms of their downstream effects on workforce development, economic sustainability, and the public good. In the language of the idiom guiding this chapter, the challenge is not whether reform is necessary, but whether reform efforts risk throwing out the baby, the public education infrastructure that sustains Ohio's future workforce, with the bathwater of inefficiency or dissatisfaction.

Seeing the Pipeline: A Professional *Currere* on Public Education and Workforce Development in Ohio

Currere is a reflective method that uses lived experience as a source of insight, inviting the writer to move between personal narrative and broader social analysis. In this section, I engage in a professional *currere*, examining Ohio's education policy landscape through the experiences that have shaped my understanding as a chief human resources officer and human capital strategist. This reflection is intended not as a departure from the policy discussion, but as a way of seeing the human capital pipeline more clearly through the lens of leadership, workforce development, and organizational change. As a Chief Human Resources Officer at a public university, I spend much of my professional life focused on people. I think about recruitment, retention, succession planning, leadership development, employee engagement, and workforce shortages. Every strategic discussion eventually returns to a common question: Where will our future talent come from?

At first glance, this seems like a higher education question. Universities educate future professionals. Employers hire graduates. Workforce development becomes the responsibility of colleges and universities.

Or so I thought.

I pause here because this assumption shaped much of my early professional thinking. Workforce conversations often begin at the point where individuals enter higher education or the labor market. We discuss enrollment, graduation rates, credentials, and employment outcomes. We focus on the visible end of the pipeline. But over time, I began to wonder whether we were looking too late in the process. When did the workforce actually begin?

Regressive: Looking Back Through a Human Capital Lens

Several years ago, I found myself sitting in a cabinet meeting discussing persistent vacancies across multiple divisions. We talked about recruitment challenges, retirements, succession planning, and talent shortages. The conversation was not unique. Similar discussions were occurring across higher education, healthcare, government agencies, and private industry.

Everyone around the table was asking essentially the same question: Why aren't there enough qualified people? At the time, I viewed the issue through a human resources lens. We discussed compensation strategies, professional development opportunities, employee engagement initiatives, and labor market trends. These were important conversations, but looking back, I realize something was missing.

No one talked about elementary schools, teacher shortages, school funding, nor the educational systems that had shaped every person we hoped to recruit.

I find that realization striking now. As human resources professionals, we often think strategically about talent pipelines. We understand that talent development requires long-term investment. We know that organizations cannot simply wait until leadership positions become vacant and then decide to cultivate future leaders. Effective workforce planning requires years of intentional development. Why, then, do we often treat educational policy as though it exists independently from workforce development? The more I reflect on my professional experiences, the more artificial that separation appears.

Progressive: Imagining Ohio's Future

Consider what Ohio's workforce might look like in 10 or 20 years. Will there be enough teachers to staff classrooms? Will there be enough nurses to support healthcare systems? Will there be enough engineers, social workers, counselors, public servants, and educational leaders?

As a higher education administrator, I know public universities play a significant role in answering those questions. We prepare future professionals across nearly every sector of the economy. Yet universities do not create talent from nothing. Students arrive on our campuses carrying the cumulative effects of years spent within educational systems that have either expanded or constrained their opportunities.

When discussions about vouchers and public school funding emerge, they are often framed around individual families and educational choice. Parents want the best opportunities for their children, but I wonder if Ohio is asking a larger set of questions.

- What happens when public investment increasingly shifts away from the institutions responsible for educating the overwhelming majority of future workers?
- What happens when educational policy is evaluated primarily through individual outcomes rather than collective capacity?

These are not easy nor partisan questions. They are workforce questions. As someone responsible for helping lead a public institution, I cannot help but think about the downstream implications.

Analytical: Seeing the Connections

The phrase, "Don't Throw the Baby Out with the Bath Water," resonates deeply with me because it captures a tension that frequently emerges in organizational leadership. Every institution has flaws. Organizations require reform. Systems require improvement. Accountability matters. Yet experienced leaders also understand that efforts to solve one problem can unintentionally create others.

In human resources, we see this frequently. An organization may reduce professional development funding to save money only to experience greater turnover later—eliminating positions to improve short-term budgets only to discover that institutional capacity has been weakened. Decisions that appear efficient in isolation often generate unintended consequences across the larger system.

Educational policy presents a similar challenge. Public schools are not merely educational providers. They are talent-development institutions. They are community anchors. They are employers. They are among the first links in a chain that eventually extends to colleges, universities, workplaces, and communities.

Likewise, public universities do more than award degrees. They prepare teachers who return to public schools. They educate nurses who support healthcare systems. They train engineers who contribute to economic development and researchers who drive innovation.

Increasingly, I have come to view these institutions not as separate entities but as parts of a single human capital ecosystem. I pause again because the language matters. We often hear the term pipeline.

A pipeline suggests linear movement from one stage to another. An ecosystem suggests interdependence. The success of one part depends upon the health of the others.

From that perspective, debates about public school funding are not simply K-12 issues. They are workforce issues. They are economic development issues. They are higher education issues. They are community sustainability issues.

Synthetical: Bringing the Story Together

As I reflect on my professional journey, I realize that my understanding of workforce development has expanded significantly.

Earlier in my career, I thought primarily about the workforce needs directly in front of me. How could we recruit talented employees? How could we retain them? How could we develop future leaders?

Those questions remain important. But now I find myself asking a different set of questions. What institutions make workforce development possible in the first place? What public investments create the conditions under which talent can emerge? What happens when those investments erode?

The Ohio voucher debate is often framed as a question of educational choice, and choice is part of the conversation. Yet from a strategic human capital perspective, we must ensure, in our efforts to reform educational systems, we pay sufficient attention to the broader public infrastructure that sustains workforce development. This is where the warning embedded within the idiom becomes especially relevant. The baby is not bureaucracy. The baby is not a specific funding formula. The baby is not any single institution. The baby is the public good created by an interconnected system of public education.

It is the teacher who inspires future learning. The counselor who guides a student toward college. The public university that prepares future professionals. The workforce that sustains Ohio's economy. The communities strengthened through educational opportunities.

As policymakers debate educational reform, I believe we must remain attentive to what might be lost in the process. Reform may be necessary. Innovation may be beneficial. Accountability may be essential. But if public education functions as one of Ohio's primary human capital development systems, then weakening one part of that system inevitably affects the others. From where I sit as a human resources leader, those downstream impacts are impossible to ignore.

The future workforce of Ohio depends on choices made by individual families and on the choices made about the public institutions that develop talent, create opportunity, and sustain the common good. That is why this conversation belongs to all Ohioans, not only those with children currently enrolled in school.

School Choice, Public Investment, and Workforce Development: Analysis of Ohio's Human Capital System

This section examines Ohio's expanding voucher system through an integrated framework drawing from education economics, human capital theory, and workforce development research. While public discourse frequently centers on parental choice and student-level outcomes, the scholarly literature consistently emphasizes that education systems function as interdependent institutional ecosystems. These systems shape not only individual opportunity but also labor market stability, fiscal capacity, and long-term economic development. Drawing on Kang (2022), Epple et al. (2017), McEwan (2000), Grubb and Allen (2011), Jackson et al. (2016), Baker (2018), Ingersoll (2001), Heckman (2006), and Symonds et al. (2011), this analysis situates Ohio's policy trajectory within a broader empirical and theoretical framework and evaluates its downstream implications for workforce development.

Education as a Public Good, Human Capital Formation, and the Limits of Market Framing

Kang (2022) conceptualizes education as a private good consumed by individuals and a public good that generates broad social returns. This challenges market-based policy approaches that treat education primarily as a consumer choice. Education is, instead, understood as a key, foundational infrastructure that produces collective benefits, including workforce stability, civic capacity, and economic productivity.

This public goods perspective is supported by Jackson et al. (2016), whose quasi-experimental analysis demonstrates that increases in school spending lead to significant long-term gains in adult earnings, educational attainment, and neighborhood economic outcomes. Their findings provide robust empirical evidence that educational investment generates measurable economic returns at individual and societal levels. Similarly, Baker (2018) argues that school finance adequacy is directly linked to student outcomes and that underfunding disproportionately affects economically disadvantaged communities. Together, this literature suggests that education finance decisions are not neutral budgetary choices but reflect long-term investments in human capital formation and economic development.

From this perspective, voucher expansion must be evaluated not only in terms of individual access or choice but also in terms of its effects on the broader public education infrastructure that produces long-run economic capacity.

System Effects of Voucher Programs and Educational Stratification

The economics literature on school choice creates a more complex and often cautionary view of voucher systems than is reflected in public debate. Epple et al. (2017) emphasize that voucher programs produce system-level effects, including sorting, stratification, and institutional adjustment, which may not be captured in short-term student outcome measures. McEwan (2000) similarly notes that large-scale voucher systems can generate unintended consequences related to equity, resource allocation, and institutional stability. These findings are reinforced by research from Lubienski et al. (2009), which highlights that school choice systems often produce differentiated educational markets rather than uniformly improved performance outcomes.

Within Ohio, these dynamics are visible in the coexistence of expanding voucher participation and increasing strain on public school systems. While some students may experience positive postsecondary outcomes, including higher rates of college enrollment (as found in Urban Institute (2023) analyses of Ohio's EdChoice program), these individual gains must be understood within a broader system context that includes resource redistribution and institutional reconfiguration.

Teacher Labor Markets, Retention, and Workforce Instability

A central downstream effect of education policy is its impact on the educator workforce. Ingersoll (2001) demonstrates that teacher shortages are primarily driven by retention failures rather than recruitment deficits, with working conditions and organizational stability serving as key determinants of attrition. This insight is critical when evaluating the structural effects of funding shifts across education systems.

Data from the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (ODEW) show persistent attrition among early-career educators, consistent with national trends identified by the Learning Policy Institute (2025). Sutcher et al. (2016) document that teacher shortages are structural and worsening, driven by compensation constraints, workload intensification, and insufficient preparation pipelines.

From a human capital perspective, educator attrition represents a breakdown in the foundational layer of workforce production. Public schools serve as the primary institutional setting in which future human capital is formed. When staffing instability increases, instructional continuity and educational quality are affected, which in turn influences long-term workforce readiness.

Grubb and Allen (2011) argue that educational systems should be understood as long-term investment infrastructures rather than short-term fiscal units. Within this framework, teacher turnover and reliance on emergency or alternative certification pathways represent systemic risks to human capital quality and consistency.

Heckman's work on skill formation further reinforces this argument by emphasizing that skills are cumulative and developed over time through stable educational environments. Disruptions in instructional continuity, therefore, have compounding effects on workforce readiness over time.

Postsecondary Pathways, Career Technical Education, and Workforce Alignment

Empirical evidence on Ohio's voucher system presents a nuanced set of outcomes. Urban Institute (2023) research indicates that voucher recipients demonstrate higher rates of college enrollment and bachelor's degree attainment relative to comparable public-school peers, which suggests that certain student populations may experience improved access to postsecondary education.

However, Epple et al. (2017) caution that such outcomes must be interpreted within the broader system of educational sorting. Educational pathways do not operate independently; rather, they reflect structural distribution of opportunity across institutions.

At the same time, Ohio is experiencing increased demand for career-technical education (CTE) pathways. Enrollment in Joint

Vocational School Districts has risen significantly, reflecting growing labor market demand for skilled technical workers in manufacturing, healthcare, and advanced industries. Symonds et al. (2011) argue that strong economies require robust "multiple pathways" systems that integrate both academic and technical preparation rather than privileging one over the other.

Ohio's recent labor market trends reinforce this need. Industrial investment and workforce demand, particularly in advanced manufacturing and technology sectors, have increased the importance of middle-skill credentialing systems. However, fiscal constraints within public education, partially shaped by broader funding reallocations, raise concerns about the State's capacity to scale these programs effectively. Policy Matters Ohio (2025a) estimates that Ohio's education system remains significantly underfunded relative to adequacy benchmarks, creating constraints on district capacity to invest in facilities, staffing, and technical program expansion.

Fiscal Reallocation, Local Tax Burdens, and Economic Development Effects

Education finance policy also generates significant macro-fiscal consequences. When state funding is redirected or insufficient to meet district obligations, local governments often rely more heavily on property tax levies to sustain public schools. Policy Matters Ohio (2025b) documents this shift as a structural transfer of education funding responsibility from state to local taxpayers.

Baker (2018) emphasizes that inadequate funding structures disproportionately affect districts serving higher-need student populations, exacerbating inequities in educational opportunity and long-term outcomes.

From an economic development perspective, these fiscal dynamics have implications for labor mobility and regional competitiveness. Employers consider public school quality and tax stability when making location decisions, thus, education finance structures indirectly influence workforce attraction and retention.

Thus, the fiscal architecture of education policy functions not only as a mechanism for funding schools but also as a determinant of regional economic stability.

Ohio's Human Capital System as an Interdependent Ecosystem

Across the literature and Ohio-specific evidence, a consistent conclusion emerges: Education systems operate as interconnected human capital ecosystems rather than isolated institutional sectors. Changes in one component of the system, such as voucher expansion, generate ripple effects across teacher labor markets, district finance structures, postsecondary pathways, and regional economic development.

Kang (2022) provides the normative foundation for this interpretation by framing education as a public good. Jackson et al. (2016) and Baker (2018) provide empirical evidence of the long-term economic returns to educational investment. Ingersoll (2001) and the Learning Policy Institute highlight the fragility of the educator workforce. Heckman (2006) underscores the cumulative nature of skill formation. Finally, Epple et al. (2017) and McEwan (2000) demonstrate that voucher systems have to be evaluated in terms of system-wide effects rather than isolated outcomes.

Taken together, this body of evidence suggests that Ohio's voucher expansion should be understood not simply as an expansion of educational choice but as a structural reconfiguration of the State's human capital development system. While individual-level gains may exist within certain segments of the student population, the broader system-level effects raise important questions about workforce sustainability, institutional stability, and long-term economic development.

From a human capital perspective, the central policy issue is not whether school choice benefits some students but whether the State's education system can continue to generate the workforce capacity Ohio's future requires. The evidence suggests that the expansion of vouchers is producing a gradual but consequential shift of resources away from the public institutions that educate most Ohio students and supply much of the State's future talent. The result is increasing pressure on teacher labor markets, reduced fiscal stability for public districts, growing challenges in scaling career-technical pathways, and widening regional disparities in educational opportunity. Although these effects may emerge slowly, they collectively threaten the strength and sustainability of Ohio's talent-development pipeline. In this sense, the greatest risk is not the success of school choice itself, but the erosion of the public education infrastructure that underpins the State's workforce and economic future.

Managing Ohio's Human Capital Ecosystem: Strategic Insights, Risks, and Policy Considerations

Evaluating Ohio's universal EdChoice expansion through a human capital lens requires reframing the State not simply as an education provider, but as a comprehensive talent development system. In this framing, public schools, career-technical institutions, and public universities function as interconnected components of a single workforce pipeline. The central question is, therefore, not whether school choice expands individual opportunity in isolation, but whether the overall system strengthens or weakens Ohio's long-term capacity to build, retain, and deploy human capital at scale.

This analysis draws on Kang (2022), who conceptualizes education as a public good with broad social returns, as well as Epple et al. (2017) and McEwan (2000), who emphasize that voucher systems must be evaluated in terms of system-wide effects rather than individual outcomes alone. It also builds on Grubb and Allen (2011), Jackson et al. (2016), Baker (2018), Ingersoll (2001), and Heckman's human capital formation theory, all of which underscore that educational investments generate cumulative, long-term effects on workforce capacity, economic mobility, and institutional stability.

From this integrated perspective, Ohio's voucher expansion produces not a singular outcome, but a set of structural tradeoffs across multiple dimensions of the State's human capital system.

Talent Pipeline Dynamics: Expansion at the Top, Strain in the Middle

A core tension in Ohio's current policy trajectory is the simultaneous strengthening of some segments of the talent pipeline and the weakening of others. Voucher programs may increase access to private schooling options for some families and are associated in certain studies (e.g., Urban Institute, 2023, analyses of EdChoice) with higher rates of college enrollment and degree completion. These outcomes reflect a potential expansion of what might be described as the "upper academic funnel" of the workforce pipeline.

This effect must be interpreted within a broader systems framework. Epple et al. (2017) caution that voucher systems tend to produce stratification and sorting effects that reshape educational pathways across the entire system. In Ohio, this is particularly significant given the simultaneous expansion of Career Technical Education (CTE) programs and increasing demand for middle-skill labor in manufacturing, healthcare, and technology sectors.

Symonds et al. (2011) argue that modern economies require "multiple pathways" systems that balance academic and technical preparation. Yet fiscal constraints within public education, exacerbated by the diversion of funds associated with universal voucher expansion, raise concerns about whether Ohio can adequately scale its CTE infrastructure. Policy Matters Ohio (2025a) estimates substantial gaps between current funding levels and adequacy benchmarks, suggesting that resource constraints may limit the State's ability to respond to workforce demand in high-growth sectors.

From a human capital perspective, this creates a structural imbalance: Expansion in one segment of the pipeline may coincide with underinvestment in another, producing a misalignment between educational outputs and labor market needs.

Workforce Stability and the Educator Labor Market

A second and equally significant downstream effect concerns the educator workforce itself. Ingersoll (2001) demonstrates that teacher shortages are primarily driven by retention failures rather than recruitment deficits, with working conditions, compensation structures, and institutional stability serving as primary determinants of attrition.

Ohio's education workforce data, consistent with national trends identified by the Learning Policy Institute (2025), indicate persistent attrition among early-career educators. From a systems perspective, this reflects both labor market fluctuation and a weakening of the institutional capacity needed to sustain instructional quality.

Grubb and Allen (2011) emphasize that educational systems should be understood as long-term investments in human capital formation. Within this framework, teacher turnover is not merely an employment challenge; it is a structural risk to the stability of the entire talent pipeline. Heckman's work on skill formation further reinforces this point, emphasizing that human capital is accumulated over time through stable, reinforcing educational environments. Disruptions in educator continuity, therefore, have compounding effects on student learning trajectories and, ultimately, workforce readiness.

Voucher-related fiscal reallocation pressures may intensify these dynamics by constraining district budgets, increasing workload burdens, and accelerating burnout. While private school environments represent an alternative labor market, they often operate with lower compensation structures and fewer long-term benefits, contributing to a fragmented and unstable statewide educator labor ecosystem.

Fiscal Structure, Local Burden Shifting, and Economic Competitiveness

Beyond workforce dynamics, Ohio's voucher expansion has important fiscal implications that extend into broader economic development systems. Baker (2018) emphasizes that school funding adequacy is directly tied to educational outcomes and that underinvestment disproportionately affects high-need districts, exacerbating inequality across communities.

In Ohio, reductions in state-level educational funding adequacy are increasingly offset through local property tax levies, effectively shifting the fiscal burden of public education onto local taxpayers. This dynamic creates uneven regional impacts, particularly in lower-income or rural districts with limited tax bases.

These fiscal pressures have broader implications for labor mobility and regional competitiveness. Employers considering relocation decisions often evaluate not only workforce availability but also the quality of local public education systems and the stability of local tax environments. As such, education finance structures indirectly influence talent attraction, business investment, and regional economic development.

Kang (2022) frames education as a public good precisely because of these spillover effects. When public education systems are weakened, the consequences extend beyond individual students to affect entire communities and labor markets.

Equity, Geographic Disparities, and Labor Market Fragmentation

Another downstream consequence of Ohio's voucher expansion is the uneven geographic distribution of educational opportunity. Private schools are disproportionately concentrated in urban and suburban regions, while rural and economically distressed communities often have limited or no private school access. As a result, voucher systems may inadvertently function as a geographic subsidy that benefits regions already advantaged by higher levels of private educational infrastructure.

This contributes to what may be understood as "regional skill divergence," in which certain areas experience greater access to diversified educational pathways while others remain heavily reliant on under-resourced public systems. Over time, this contributes to uneven workforce development outcomes across the State.

Additionally, because private schools retain greater discretion in admissions and service provision, public schools increasingly serve higher concentrations of students requiring specialized services, including special education and behavioral supports. This concentration of need without proportional resource adjustment can further strain public systems and exacerbate disparities in educational opportunity.

A Fragmented Human Capital System

Evidence suggests that Ohio's universal voucher expansion operates as a structural reconfiguration of the State's human capital system rather than a discrete educational reform. Certain student populations may experience improved access to private educational options and potential gains in postsecondary outcomes, but broader system-level effects include educator workforce instability, fiscal pressure on public districts, uneven regional development, and potential misalignment between educational outputs and labor market demand.

Epple et al. (2017) and McEwan (2000) caution that such reforms must be evaluated in terms of system-wide consequences rather than isolated outcomes. Jackson et al. (2016) and Baker (2018) demonstrate that educational investment is closely tied to long-term economic performance, reinforcing the importance of maintaining robust public education infrastructure. Ingersoll (2001) and Heckman (2006) emphasize the centrality of stable workforce conditions and cumulative skill formation in sustaining human capital systems.

From this integrated perspective, Ohio's current trajectory can be understood as a high-variability policy intervention—one that may produce localized gains in certain segments of the educational pipeline while simultaneously introducing structural fragility into the broader workforce development system.

Conclusion: Strategic Implications for Ohio's Workforce Future

From a statewide human capital strategy perspective, Ohio's voucher expansion represents both an opportunity and a risk. It expands educational choice and may enhance outcomes for certain students, but it also introduces structural pressures that affect the stability, equity, and capacity of the broader education system.

The central implication of this analysis is that education policy cannot be evaluated solely through individual-level outcomes or short-term fiscal metrics. It must be assessed as a long-term investment in the State's workforce infrastructure. The educator labor market, K–12 system capacity, career-technical pipelines, and higher education institutions are not separate domains but interdependent components of a single human capital ecosystem.

If Ohio aims to maintain a competitive and sustainable workforce over time, policy decisions must account for these interdependencies. Otherwise, the State risks producing a polarized labor market characterized by strong upper-tier academic attainment alongside weakened middle-skill pipelines and persistent educator shortages.

The challenge is not whether reform is necessary but whether reform efforts preserve or, better, improve the integrity of the system that produces Ohio's future workforce. The health of Ohio's economy depends on expanding opportunity for individual students and on sustaining the institutional infrastructure that makes that opportunity possible.

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Chapter 8

The Squeaky Wheel Gets the Grease

Conclusion

By T*homas S. Poetter*

Who's got a squeaky wheel or two? I do, how about you?

Everyone who is doing work on the educational problems and issues and possibilities of school choice, and especially on the contentious EdChoice Expansion voucher issue in Ohio, is taking a position—that goes at least for those who are paying attention. I think a lot of people care, but they may not be aware of what's actually going on and, therefore, are unable to take a position and have any influence whatsoever. One of the things that citizens in the know can do—and you are absolutely "in the know" if you picked this book up and read any part of it, even just the cover—is talk about what is happening openly with friends and family and beyond.

That is, start squeaking! Make a ruckus somehow. Take a stand, or take any of the steps I list below as a citizen or friend of our great state (or beyond it!) to get more people talking, questioning, helping, moving. And more importantly, as an educator, I'd say: Just learn more, and become more knowledgeable about what is happening all around us with our education infrastructure in Ohio. It makes a difference, and impacts everyone. Remember that the "miles" that the voucher advocates gained on their dream of building a second, private system of publicly funded schools at our expense started by taking an inch here and an inch there. Every mile is made of inches. What inches can you take? (See Connor and Rashmi's Chapter 3 here, "Give Them an Inch and They Will Take a Mile")

The more people who care about and talk about education, public and private, what the purposes of education are, how education can work and be better, and the degree to which citizens and government entities can improve education, the better. More talk and more understanding and more knowledge are all better. The more we talk ("Squeak," but not like mice! Read my introduction in Chapter 1!), the more attention and discourse and action/movement can happen, and perhaps the more likely it could be for all of us to reverse the awful trend of our elected officials siphoning public funds meant for public education into private hands. Turning the squeaky wheel in another direction would benefit everyone. Everyone. But it takes squeaking a lot, and it takes piles of elbow grease!

If you are interested in taking a next step, share this book with someone you know. They don't have to be someone you would like to "convert" to our multiple points of view as expressed in this volume. It could be someone you know who might care about the issue and want to learn more about it. It could also be someone you know who has a soft spot for private education but doesn't know what's really happening statewide with voucher expansion. You might say back to me, "But is everyone looking at the EdChoice Expansion voucher program from the various points of view that you did as a class, and studying it more deeply as potential scholar-authors?" No, of course not. I can't dive into every issue I care about in Ohio, either. But this resource could be a good primer, easy to access and consumed as a whole or read piecemeal on this major issue. Read it. Share it.

Go to the Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding website at www.ohiocoalition.org, click on the "about" navigation tab, and go to "Coalition Members" to see if your public school district is a member of the coalition. If so, send a note to your school board members on email or through Facebook or in a letter and congratulate them for being a member of the coalition and encourage them to use their voices publicly to defend public school funding, especially as the Vouchers Hurt Ohio case makes its way through the appeals court process and beyond. If your school district is not a member of the coalition, encourage your board members to consider it and forward a copy of this book to them. Ask them to read a certain section, and discuss it.

While you are at the Coalition website, look at the daily emails that go out from the Coalition under "Latest News." 25 of the blog posts are included here in this book. If you want to receive the emails in your own inbox, you can email the Coalition at ohioeanda@sbcglobal.net and request to be added to the email list. The Coalition has a lot to offer and important work to do. Do what you can to support them and their mission to defend and foster public schooling in Ohio. We all benefit from strong public schools.

If you are interested in taking a next step beyond learning more about and interacting with the Coalition, contact your local lawmakers and discuss your position on the EdChoice Voucher Expansion. Tell them you read this book. Send them a copy of it or ask the Coalition to do so. Your city or township council members, state reps and senators, and federal representatives all have some degree of input about decisions made regarding public school funding. The more you interact with them, the more your positions have influence. Remember, the more this "benefit" to a few takes root in our polity, the harder it gets to eradicate it. If you would rather see the nearly $2.5 billion earmarked for public education that is now going to private education providers across the State and in your communities over the two-year budget cycle instead benefit public schools, let your representatives know. You are a constituent. You have a voice; use it.

Consider making your own posts on social media or through traditional media and news outlets about what you have learned or what you have experienced with school choice and vouchers. People have led movements on social media, and their messages have taken root. When they are well-argued and connect with people in ways that advance our understanding and paths forward, those efforts can have influence and make a difference. There are plenty of people online advancing the cause of using public funds for private ends. Where are the voices of those who know that public money is a public trust that requires careful auditing. We expect nothing less than full transparency, openness, and access to records from all others who receive public monies. Make the case for keeping all public monies earmarked for education public. That might change the landscape and discourse more broadly.

Beyond using social media or any other type of media to advance a point of view, consider running for office. It's a big step; I know that because it's one step I took in 2014 (see Poetter, 2016). But you don't have to bite off more than you can chew like I did in the political race I entered! Run for school board, city council, township trustee, state representative, etc. Get involved in the discourse and good work that can be done in government, and engage in conversations while you campaign, since campaigns are a service to others, too, and you can at least influence points of view if not enough votes to win the race. Your efforts might help turn the tide of the disastrous wave of current school funding policy changes.

In the end, we want to thank you for reading any part of this book and encourage you to take next steps, whatever they may be and wherever they lead. We hope that you will take this book and run with it, and squeak with knowledge and gusto along the way.

References

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Author Bios

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Thomas S. Poetter is professor of Curriculum Studies in the Department of Educational Leadership at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio; editor of *The Currere Exchange Journal*; and author of over 125 published books, articles, book chapters, and commissioned reports. Of his 28 books, this volume is his 18th co-written, co-edited, and co-published with student scholars. In March 2026, Poetter received the Benjamin Harrison Medallion, Miami's most prestigious career faculty award at Miami, in recognition of his "outstanding contribution to the education of the nation."

Amanda Robinson, is the Principal at Loveland Middle School in Cincinnati, Ohio, and graduate of Miami's Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.) Program. Her doctoral work focused on exclusionary discipline and superintendents' perspectives on their discretionary authority. Her goal is to build a highly inclusive school culture. She focuses daily on breaking down barriers, strengthening community ties, and finding innovative ways to keep middle schoolers actively engaged in their learning journeys.

Anthony W. Rose is a cybersecurity educator, program director, and father whose work centers on access, inclusion, and opportunity in online technology education. At Miami University Regionals, he helps prepare students for careers in cybersecurity and networking while advocating for more equitable pathways into the field. His writing is shaped by both his professional experience and his personal journey as the father of a child with autism, bringing compassion, reflection, and purpose to his work.