



A NEW KIND OF POLICY THINK TANK.

**Testimony of Stephen Dyer
Education Policy Fellow**

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chairwoman Slaby and Ranking Member Fedor. It's good to be before the committee I had the honor of serving on for four years.

While much of the discussion around Ohio's school privatization efforts has centered around the state's much-maligned charter schools, a recent, aggressive push in Columbus and Washington, D.C. to ramp up investment in private, mostly religious school vouchers has begun eating up more of the education policy conversation.

House Bill 200, which would expand voucher eligibility to 1 million more students, could potentially end many school districts around the state. This is on top of President Trump's proposed \$1.4 billion voucher expansion nationwide beginning this fall, with an eye toward expanding it to \$20 billion.

HB 200 would, according to the Legislative Service Commission, cost the state between \$45 to more than \$1 billion, depending on how many students take the new voucher.

However, there is little evidence that these programs actually do what they're claimed to do – improve educational outcomes for kids. In fact, three recent studies (including one from Ohio) show that vouchers actually *hurt* the kids who take them.

In light of these aggressive policy pushes, it is necessary to step back and examine how vouchers have done in Ohio, which first started offering them in Cleveland in 1996, ostensibly to help kids “escape failing schools.” After 20 years, what the data indicate is any proposed expansion is not warranted, and, in fact, it could have ruinous effects upon kids and families in both voucher schools and local public schools.

Among the data revealed in our new report from Innovation Ohio:

- Vouchers now affect schools and children in 83 percent of Ohio's school districts
- More than \$310 million will be spent this school year sending public money to private, mostly religious schools through vouchers
- Including additional direct state payments and reimbursements made to private, mostly religious schools, more than \$568 million in Ohio taxpayer money is going to support these schools
- Every Ohio student not taking a voucher, on average, loses \$63 a year in state funding because of the way Ohio's lawmakers have decided to fund vouchers

- In an era of the state providing less funding for public schools, its insatiable investment in private school vouchers force local taxpayers to subsidize them with \$105 million in locally raised money to make up for districts' state funding losses to Ohio's voucher programs
- Students who take vouchers perform *worse* than their public school peers on state assessments
- Some of the highest performing school districts in the state lose money and students to vouchers, turning the original intent of the program on its head

Lawmakers in Columbus and Washington must take heed of Ohio's experience.

Ohio has been on the front lines of the private school voucher fight for two decades.

In 1995, Ohio passed its pilot voucher program in Cleveland, which began in the 1996-1997 school year as a \$2.9 million investment. It was challenged in court because most of the money went to the city's Catholic schools – a fact critics said violated the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution.

In 2002, in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Cleveland voucher program—the only private school voucher program offered in the state at that time—was constitutional, despite the fact that public tax dollars were going to private, mostly religious schools.

Then-Chief Justice William Rehnquist stated in his opinion that “[a]ny objective observer familiar with the full history and context of the Ohio program would reasonably view it as one aspect of a broader undertaking to assist poor children in failed schools.” The ruling found the program was limited in scope and costs and, therefore, wasn't an overly burdensome infringement on the Establishment Clause of the Constitution.

Times have changed.

What was once a single program in one city that cost taxpayers \$2.9 million per year has become a more than \$310 million annual venture, and the growth shows no signs of slowing. Originally created to help students in poor-performing Cleveland schools, the number of voucher programs has steadily grown to include five different voucher programs, making more students around the state eligible. By the 2006-2007 school year, nearly a third of Ohio's 613 school districts saw some students opting to attend private schools using taxpayer-funded vouchers. Private school vouchers are now impacting 83 percent of Ohio school districts—certainly not all of which are failing.

The pro-school choice advocacy group, The Fordham Institute, recently examined EdChoice, Ohio's largest voucher program. The Fordham Institute found that voucher students didn't do better or the same as their public school counterparts. They did worse.

As the report put it:

“The students who used vouchers to attend private schools fared worse on state exams compared to their closely matched peers remaining in public schools.”

The study looked at math and reading scores where voucher participants did significantly worse in the study's limited scope.

Even in Cleveland – an often ridiculed district by school choice advocates – vouchers were found to not substantially improve the performance of the students who utilized them. This supports other research indicating that controlling for demographics, public schools overall do better than their private school competitors.ⁱ

In fact, The New York Times reported that the latest round of research has found that “vouchers may harm students who receive them. The results are startling – the worst in the history of the field, researchers say.”

Vice President Mike Pence's Indiana invested heavily in vouchers. Yet researchers found voucher students there lost significant ground on math achievement scores in Indiana.

Kids in New Orleans did much poorer on math and reading scores, with students scoring in the 50th percentile in math who took a voucher ending up in the 26th percentile after the voucher.

If you're not doing this to improve educational outcomes for kids, why do it?

HB 200 could financially ruin some local school districts, not produce better outcomes for kids and cost the state potentially hundreds of millions of additional dollars. Other than that, though...

I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

ⁱ Ryan, Julia. "Are Private Schools Worth It?" *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 18 Oct. 2013. Web. 05 June 2017.