

Opponent Testimony on School Choice in HB 33
Jan Resseger, Heights Coalition for Public Education
Ohio Senate Education Committee, May 4, 2023

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Ohio Senate Education Committee:

I strongly oppose Ohio House Bill 33's vast expansion of EdChoice vouchers for private school tuition. I was educated in the public schools in Havre, Montana, where, as in small towns and rural areas across Ohio, school choice is not a viable option. Since 1976, I have lived in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, where my now-adult children were privileged to be educated in the public schools from Kindergarten through high school. Fully phasing in the Fair School Funding Plan should be the Ohio Legislature's priority today when public school districts in too many rural and urban areas struggle to afford librarians, art and music teachers, and enough counselors and social workers.

Voucher expansion will further siphon essential tax revenue from the school foundation budget, thereby reducing services in the public schools that serve the majority of Ohio's 1.6 million students. Public schools are universally available, publicly accountable and publicly funded. Public schools balance the needs of each particular student and family with the community's obligation to create a system that, by law, protects the rights of all students. Our challenge as a society is to keep on improving access, equity and academic excellence in the public schools---the only educational institution where fulfillment of these promises is possible.

The Dispatch's [Anna Staver reports](#) that House Bill 33 would expand EdChoice voucher eligibility to students in families with incomes up to \$135,000---450 % of the federal poverty line, which would make 80% of students eligible for a voucher. Staver adds that under the new Fair School Funding Plan's per-pupil base cost calculation for the upcoming biennium, the per-pupil EdChoice voucher would increase from \$7,500 to \$8,407 for each high school voucher from \$5,500 to \$6,165 for each K-8 voucher. The Legislative Service Commission estimates that increasing the amount of each EdChoice voucher by these amounts will itself cost the state nearly \$100 million over the biennium. Although the LSC does not seem to have published an estimate of the overall cost of the proposed HB 33 EdChoice expansion, we know that the amount would depend primarily on how many families whose students already attend private schools decide immediately to take a voucher to defray their costs.

The proposed HB 33 expansion of income eligibility for EdChoice would skew the investment of state dollars to serve our state's wealthier students, many of whom already attend private schools. And while families in small towns and rural areas depend on the state's investment in their public schools as their essential educational option, the expansion of EdChoice would skew the state's distribution of tax dollars toward students living metropolitan areas and larger towns where private schools are available. And, having watched voucher programs in Ohio and other states over the years, we also know that once established, these programs grow more expensive year by year.

In a new report, [The Fiscal Consequences of Private School Vouchers](#) Samuel E. Abrams, the director of the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education at Columbia University's Teachers College and his colleague Steven J. Koutsavlis, address what it costs the public schools as states siphon out money for privatized educational choice: "The claim that it costs less to educate students with private school vouchers than in public schools ignores numerous realities. Voucher programs shift key expenses to parents; often subsidize private tuition for families who would never have enrolled in public schools; do not dilute fixed costs for public education systems, and concentrate higher-need, more-costly-to-educate students in already underfunded public schools." And yet, "Voucher programs, even with significant expansion during the last one to two decades, still serve only a small percentage of the nation's children."

In [State Policymakers Should Reject K-12 School Voucher Plans: Proposals Would Undermine Public Schools](#), the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities also recently examined what our society loses when states create voucher plans that make publicly funded school vouchers available to unregulated private schools: "While public schools must adhere to federal civil rights protections, students using vouchers to attend private schools can be explicitly or implicitly denied opportunities based on their race and ethnicity, gender presentation, and disability... Siphoning public dollars to fund private schools does not guarantee that all students will be admitted and adequately supported at private schools."

In [School Vouchers: There Is No Upside](#), Michigan State University Professor Josh Cowen, who has been conducting voucher research for more than two decades, enumerates what current research demonstrates about serious damage wrought by the widespread expansion of vouchers across the states: "First, vouchers mostly fund children already in

private school... Second... Although a few tiny studies from the late 1990s and early 2000s showed small gains in test scores for voucher users, since 2013, the record is dismal... Third... the typical private school in line for a voucher handout isn't one of the elite private schools.... The typical voucher school is what I refer to as a sub-prime provider.... The fourth pattern is related: kids flee those sub-prime schools... Fifth comes the issue of transparency and oversight... If we're going to use taxpayer funds on these private ventures, we need to know what the academic results are... Finally... imagine you simply knew that written into the legislation for voucher programs is the explicit right of private schools to turn down any child they wanted to reject so long as something about that child varied from the school's so-called 'creed.'"

[Cowen details](#) what happens to student achievement when students leave public schools and transfer to private schools with a voucher: "Although small, pilot-phase programs showed some promise two decades ago, new evaluations of vouchers in Washington, D.C., Indiana, Louisiana, and Ohio show some of the largest test score drops ever seen in the research record---between -0.15 and -0.50 standard deviations of learning loss... That's because elite private schools with strong academics and large endowments often decline to participate in voucher plans. Instead the typical voucher school is a financially distressed, sub-prime private provider often jumping at the chance for a tax bailout to stay open a few extra years... (F)or most students, using a voucher is a temporary choice to begin with. In states that have reported data on the question---Indiana, Louisiana, and Wisconsin---roughly 20% of students leave voucher programs each year, either because they give up the payment or because schools push them out."

In [Consumed](#), a powerful analysis of the problems which ensue when public institutions are transformed by marketplace thinking, the late political philosopher, Benjamin Barber contrasts the results when individualist thinking undermines support for the public institutions: "Freedom is not just about standing alone and saying no. As a usable ideal, it turns out to be a public rather than a private notion... (N)owadays, the idea that only private persons are free, and that only personal choices of the kind consumers make count as autonomous, turns out to be an assault not on tyranny but on democracy. It challenges not the illegitimate power by which tyrants once ruled us but the legitimate power by which we try to rule ourselves in common. Where once this notion of liberty challenged corrupt power, today it undermines legitimate power... It forgets the very meaning of the social contract, a covenant in which individuals agree to give up unsecured private liberty in exchange for the blessings of public liberty and common security." (*Consumed*, pp.119-123)

Barber concludes: "Privatization is a kind of reverse social contract: it dissolves the bonds that tie us together into free communities and democratic republics. It puts us back in the state of nature where we possess a natural right to get whatever we can on our own, but at the same time lose any real ability to secure that to which we have a right. Private choices rest on individual power... personal skills... and personal luck. Public choices rest on civic rights and common responsibilities, and presume equal rights for all. Public liberty is what the power of common endeavor establishes, and hence presupposes that we have constituted ourselves as public citizens by opting into the social contract. With privatization, we are seduced back into the state of nature by the lure of private liberty and particular interest; but what we experience in the end is an environment in which the strong dominate the weak... the very dilemma which the original social contract was intended to address." (*Consumed*, pp. 143-144)

I oppose the vast expansion of eligibility for EdChoice vouchers in HB 33 because it is clear that diverting a larger investment of public funds to pay students' tuition at private schools will undermine the public schools which are universally available and accessible for every one of our state's children---whether in a rural area, a small town, a city or a suburb. Additionally, while the state cannot protect the rights of children in private schools or even be sure every child would be accepted, the public schools are required by law to meet all children's needs and protect their rights.

Rather than diverting the state's tax revenues to accommodate individual parents' educational choices, in the FY 2024-2025 biennium the Legislature should fully fund the phase-in of the Fair School Funding Plan and ensure that, according to the plan's original design, Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid is phased in at the same rate as the rest of the plan.