

Senate Finance Committee Hearing  
May 31, 2023  
Presented by Susan Kaeser  
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Chairman Dolan, Vice Chairman Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, my name is Susie Kaeser and I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts with the committee about education funding in HB 33. I live in Cleveland Heights, my children were educated in our public schools, and I have been an advocate for public education and its role in our democracy and as a resource for equal opportunity, for more than 40 years. There is nothing more important to me than the fair and adequate funding of our system of public education. I am deeply concerned about the senate's priorities when it comes to K-12 education.

I live in Cuyahoga County, the epicenter of private school education in Ohio. According to data on the Ohio Department of Education website for the 2022-23 school year, there are 121 chartered private schools and 32,315 students who attend them in Cuyahoga County, the largest number of any county in the state. Public school enrollment is about 130,000, just behind the 168,000 public school students in Franklin County.

These opportunities color my understanding of the current budget debate about how to spend precious state resources for K-12 education, the formative years for our future leaders, voters, and employees.

Aware that personal experiences tend to inform our thinking, I decided to see just exactly who could make use of state funds for private education if the legislature makes that a priority in HB 33. Rather than assume that education opportunities that are available where I live are available everywhere, I examined the ODE data that provides for each of Ohio's 88 counties, a list of private schools, and enrollment numbers in public, private and charter schools.

I discovered that Cuyahoga County is far from typical. When it comes to private education, Ohio has an urban-rural divide. It takes population density to support private education. The larger the enrollment in public schools, the more likely there will be private options.

Private school education is widely available in 8 urban counties, and scarce in most of the rest of the state.

Cuyahoga County is one of just 8 counties with multiple private school options, and where enrollment in public, private and charter schools is robust. About 440 of the 714 private schools in Ohio are located in these 8 counties which are home to 46% of the state's public school students, 71% of the private students, and 85% of charter school students.

Rural Ohio is completely different. About 14% of the state's 1.5 million public school students live in the state's 46 counties with fewer than 8,000 public school students. There are 61 private schools in these counties, that enroll about 4% of the state's private school population. There are no private schools in 11 counties and 1 school per county in 15 others. The other 20 counties have 2 or 3 schools each. Private education is equally scarce ( 3 or less schools) in 11 more moderate sized counties.

Not only is the number of private options small, private schools in rural Ohio serve a narrowly defined population. They typically cater to a specific religion, enroll elementary aged students, and are small schools that enroll fewer than 100 students.

This is not an argument for building more private schools in rural communities. That would endanger the already fragile system. Economies of scale are important to operating a school and offering a robust curriculum and enrichment opportunities. That was a major argument for the school consolidation movement that changed our education landscape years ago. Encouraging public school students in these low-density counties, to leave their schools would not reduce costs, but would surely cut state funds and education opportunities for those who prefer their public schools.

The lack of private education in the majority of Ohio counties means a significant part of the state would not benefit from new funds for private school tuition. In fact, spending more on private schools without fully funding public schools would inflict double damage on rural Ohio.

Public schools are available regardless of population density. They are the only universally available option and only option that accepts everyone. Public schools are the only real option in more than 57 counties located in 17 different senate districts. There are five senate districts where every county in the district is public school dependent, and five additional senate districts where all but one of the counties in the district is rural and lacks private options. These senators will have to choose exactly what interests they want to promote.

Increasing access to public funds for private education would not be useful to families in most of Ohio. Investing in public schools would benefit every corner of the state and every senate district.

The companion question to who benefits from a policy is who pays for it. Taxpayers from rural communities will not benefit from increased spending on private education, but they will help fund it. If lawmakers increase spending on private schools without increasing spending on public schools at the level required to meet actual education costs, rural schools will remain underfunded. And taxpayers in those communities will have to choose between reducing education opportunities in their public schools or raising their own taxes.

Our rural schools have long been forced to make due with insufficient state funding. This persistent lack of state resources is the reason for the *DeRolph* lawsuit. These are counties where bus rides are long and the cost of gas is volatile. They are also the places where public schools play a vital community role, providing resources and social interaction that isn't available in any other way.

Using state funds to pay for private education is reverse Robin Hood. Take from the poorest parts of the state, and fund an option that private citizens, not the public, should pay for.

Rural Ohio should not be asked to subsidize private education anywhere and then tax themselves more to fill the funding gap that lawmakers create when they don't adequately fund public education.

As an unwavering advocate for public education, I will always favor investing in public education. It's required by the Constitution. Public schools have a purpose that is civic not personal. Public schools are a community asset that strengthens community, builds understanding and respect for differences within that school community, tolerates diverse perspectives, and are accountable to the public. They do not discriminate and they welcome every student regardless of need.

As stewards of our public funds, I hope you will recognize that public schools are a prudent investment. The lack of oversight and accountability to a publicly elected board makes private schools more susceptible to abuse and a riskier place to spend public funds. There is no requirement that they offer a curriculum that develops thinking skills and social skills needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy, or that they protect the equal rights of all students.

If you do not share my commitment to this critical democratic institution, I hope you will consider the important question of who benefits and who pays. This data suggests it isn't fair to most of Ohio to make private education a priority. It will in fact cause harm, particularly in 17 senate districts that have economically fragile rural public schools.

I have attached a spreadsheet that reports the data that I reviewed to make these observations about the public-private school divide in Ohio.

**Enrollment by Education Source By County****Rank Ordered by Public School District Enrollment 2021-22 School Year***Source: ODE Reports Portal*

<b>County</b>	<b>Public</b>	<b>Private</b>	<b>Charter</b>	<b># Private Schools</b>
Franklin	168,197	22,439	24,585	84
Cuyahoga	130,783	32,315	24,681	121
Hamilton	101,516	28,825	7,250	98
Summit	65,770	10,159	8,227	39
Montgomery	63,150	9,228	7,021	35
Butler	53,697	4,022	880	14
Stark	53,089	3,739	1,089	20
Lucas	50,094	9,729	22,636	32
Lorain	39,236	4,302	2,502	16
Warren	35,852	3,546	363	14
Delaware	33,254	2,144	0	9
Lake	28,474	3,058	34	12
Licking	27,442	1,613	198	10
Clermont	25,678	1,625	0	9
Medina	25,520	1,702	0	7
Mahoning	25,516	3,282	2,350	15
Fairfield	24,803	930	0	5
Trumbull	24,416	990	715	6
Greene	20,763	1,343	285	8
Clark	18,387	1,226	364	7
Portage	18,206	529	0	3
Wood	16,458	989	0	7
Richland	15,651	1,174	1,973	8
Miami	15,423	1,036	0	7
Allen	14,041	1,778	390	7
Wayne	14,020	939	139	6
Muskingum	13,337	405	520	3
Columbiana	12,630	690	681	3
Tuskawaras	12,562	392	683	3
Ashtabula	11,903	635	0	2
Hancock	11,141	549	117	4
Erie	10,304	646	750	4
Scioto	10,126	559	362	3
Ross	9,711	534	0	3
Geauga	9,367	2,128	0	7
Pickaway	9,268	246	0	2
Marion	8,956	115	2,350	1
Huron	8,645	1,139	0	5
Lawrence	8,458	169	0	2
Belmont	8,293	529	0	6
Jefferson	8,286	889	0	4
Sandusky	8,068	519	0	2

Shelby	7,741	477	0	3
Mercer	7,835	125	0	1
Union	7,591	344	0	2
Darke	7,474	189	0	2
Auglaize	7,360	129	0	1
Knox	7,182	204	0	3
Fulton	7,170	247	0	3
Washington	7,101	249	0	2
Seneca	7,010	436	155	1
Highland	6,717	247	0	2
Clinton	6,422	240	0	1
Athens	6,395	25	0	1
Madison	6,349	101	86	1
Brown	6,206	142	0	2
Champaign	6,048	0	0	0
Crawford	5,908	140	0	3
Defiance	5,820	141	0	2
Putnam	5,776	428	0	3
Logan	5,699	348	0	1
Perry	5,539	180	0	1
Preble	5,538	0	0	0
Ashland	5,476	232	82	2
Williams	5,098	141	0	2
Morrow	4,735	172	91	1
Ottawa	4,702	107	0	2
Jackson	4,661	223	0	2
Coshocton	4,445	258	0	2
Guernsey	4,423	86	0	1
Fayette	4,408	0	0	0
Pike	4,342	164	0	2
Adams	4,220	171	0	1
Galia	4,082	172	0	1
Henry	4,014	222	0	3
Hardin	3,824	0	0	0
VanWert	3,740	79	0	1
Hocking	3,487	120	0	2
Holmes	3,296	0	0	0
Wyandot	3,193	297	0	2
Meigs	3,012	0	0	0
Paulding	2,869	63	0	1
Carroll	2,368	0	0	0
Monroe	1,938	76	0	1
Harrison	1,888	0	100	0
Vinton	1,824	0	0	0
Noble	1,686	0	0	0
Morgan	1,685	0	0	0
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