

It's A New Year With the Same Old Stuff!!

Tom Moscovic-Legislative Chairperson

(Coming to a School District near you unless the Legislature makes changes)

Increase in Private School Tuition Vouchers is Costing Districts and Soon You

CLEVELAND, Ohio – A year ago, no students in the Parma school district used Ohio's main tuition voucher program to attend private schools.

This year, thanks to changes in state law, 359 students are using vouchers.

For families paying tuition to send their kids to Parma-area private Catholic schools like Padua or Holy Name, a \$6,000 tax-funded voucher toward tuition is a huge help.

For the district, it's a \$2.1 million hit to the budget that impacts teachers, books and supplies for its schools.

Parma isn't alone in facing new or increased costs to help students attend private schools. Changes to state law, have more than tripled the number of districts declared part of the voucher program, from 40 in 2018-19 to 139 this school year.

Next year, the program meant to help students escape being stuck in failing schools will grow further, to more than 400 districts, which represents more than two-thirds of the districts in the state.

Even Solon, always at the top of state test score rankings, has a school considered failing and whose students are now eligible for vouchers. Next year, add a school in each of the high-scoring Brecksville-Broadview Heights and Mayfield districts.

The change has school officials protesting and gathering to find ways to seek relief.

"It's huge," said Barbara Shaner of the Ohio Association of School Business Officials, the organization for district treasurers. "It's hitting districts that never thought they would have to worry about it. Now, it has multiplied the number of buildings affected. Way more districts are affected."

The use of vouchers within school districts is also increasing. The Cleveland Heights-University Heights schools saw 500 more students use vouchers this year than last year, mostly to attend Jewish schools. The district's voucher bill increased by \$3 million.

That change, said district Treasurer Scott Gainer, has the school board seeking a higher tax increase than planned this spring.

Shaker Heights Superintendent David Glasner, whose district is seeing a small bill this year, but faces a larger one next year, complained to the state school board last week about the hit that school district budgets are taking.

"There are school districts that are now expecting to lose millions of dollars in the course of one year as a result of the EdChoice [voucher] expansion," Glasner said. "These are losses for which districts were unable to forecast or prepare."

State Sen. Matt Huffman, one of the strongest supporters of vouchers in Ohio, said some of the rules are subtle and have changed a few times. But districts should have known, he said, and should be blaming themselves for not improving their schools.

He said school officials should just admit to the public: "We knew this was coming for six years. We just didn't do anything about it."

How vouchers work

Ohio has four "scholarship" or voucher programs that provide tax dollars to pay tuition at private schools, almost all of which are Christian schools. There is one program just for Cleveland, which was started in 1996, so Cleveland is not affected by the current changes.

The biggest is called EdChoice. Created in 2005 for students attending "underperforming" schools or who would be assigned to them, EdChoice has a student's home district pay \$4,650 toward tuition for kindergarten through eighth grade and \$6,000 for private high schools.

This is the 2013's EdChoice Expansion, which added state-funded vouchers for low-income students.

A few issues are fueling districts' complaints: The use of schools' old state report card grades to determine which students can use vouchers, paying more for vouchers even as state aid to schools is frozen, and, a surprise this year, when students in eligible areas can start using the vouchers.

The rules for determining which public schools are designated as "underperforming" so students can use the vouchers are complicated. When Glasner raised the issue at the state school board, even board members and State Sen. Peggy Lehner, chair of the state's Senate Education Committee, were not clear on which laws in particular are creating most of the controversy or how to resolve them.

"I'm still trying to find out what we're fixing," Lehner said at that meeting.

State report card changes add to dispute

Because of state testing changes in recent years, schools are being declared EdChoice schools because of bad grades on state report card grades from five or more years ago, even though those grades have since improved.

Here's how:

Schools are declared "underperforming" using report card grades in several measures like performance, value-added, graduation rate and Improving at-risk K-3 readers. Each measure has different grades that trigger EdChoice designation, many of which involve poor grades on two out of the last three report cards.

Because the state changed its tests and report cards a few years ago, the legislature declared a "safe harbor" that blocked report cards in 2015, 2016 and 2017 from being used.

But when report card grades in 2018 started counting toward EdChoice designations, the "two out of three" criteria reached back before safe harbor and counted previous grades from 2013 and 2014.

That meant that Cleveland Heights-University Heights High School, which had poor graduation rate grades in 2013 and 2014 but had raised them over time, was still made an EdChoice school and students could use the vouchers.

Glasner and Parma Superintendent Charles Smialek said 2013-14 grades have made some of their schools part of the voucher program. Smialek said some formerly D grades are now Cs or Bs, but the schools are still voucher-eligible schools.

"I think the state's sending extremely mixed messages," Smialek said. "On the one hand they're talking about a B and that's obviously a positive, but we're also on a list that's supposed to be a lifeboat for kids in failing schools. They're completely contradictory in their two messages."

Timing matters

There's also confusion about which students who would normally attend these "underperforming" district schools can use vouchers at which times.

Old rules strictly limited when students could use the vouchers. But the state relaxed those rules this year, a year earlier than districts expected, so a flood of high school students started receiving them this year.

"We just lost an additional \$2.1 million for high school vouchers that we never anticipated, because of this scenario," Gainer said. "We have students who weren't coming here and were never going to come here taking dollars."

The district, Gainer said, can't cut its costs to compensate for those students because they were never at the district and the schools never hired teachers or bought books to teach them. Because they were always at private schools, they were never part of planning, but are now a cost the district faces.

Those new students hit budgets extra hard because of another quirk in voucher funding that has districts paying the full amount out of local property taxes.

the program at issue now, not to be confused with

Districts usually receive some state aid for students that use vouchers, even if it is less than what the district has to pay. But when students have never been in the district and never counted toward state aid calculations, Gainer said, there's no state aid for them to help offset voucher costs.

Local property taxes, Gainer said, are essentially paying for the full \$6,000 for most of the new high school vouchers. That has several districts where the same issue is occurring concerned that voters won't pass school taxes they believe just pay for kids to go to private schools.

Adding to the budget pain: The state froze aid to every district this year in the state budget, so added voucher costs just bite further into budgets.

Glasner proposed to the state board several ways to reduce the impact to districts, including capping the number of students that can use vouchers and having the state pay the voucher amount.

Shaker Heights Superintendent David Glasner tells the state school board how private school tuition vouchers are hurting his school district.

Huffman said he thinks some changes may be warranted. If a school that has strong performance overall has an issue with one report card measure, he said, that school might not be a troubled school. Clarity in rules also matters, he said, so that schools know what standards to meet to avoid consequences.

At the same time, he said he considers some private schools a bargain, compared to districts that spend much more than the cost of a voucher per student.

"The \$6,000 is a better deal to the taxpayers than \$12,000," he said.

(The Legislature is looking to craft language to make substantive changes in the law)

Ohio Sen. Sherrod Brown Seeks Better Tracking of Child Abuse Deaths

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Ohio Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown teamed up with Missouri Republican Sen. Roy Blunt on Wednesday to introduce legislation that would require states to collect data on deaths that stem from child-abuse, and to devise ways to prevent them by collaborating with the Department of Health and Human Services, pediatricians, public health and law enforcement officials.

Brown said better reporting of child abuse fatalities would help states gauge the scope of the problem and figure out when and why the fatalities occur. He hopes his legislative proposal will be wrapped into a larger Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) bill that Congress is considering.

"Too many kids slip through the cracks," said Brown, citing an estimate that 1,720 children died from abuse and neglect in 2017. "One child's death is too many."

Sierra Giles of Cleveland endorsed Brown's bill in a conference call with reporters. Giles is legal guardian of a child named Rayvon Owens whose five-year-old sister, Ta'naejah McCloud, died of a seizure after his mother threw her into a dresser. Giles said she reported prior abuse of the girl, but authorities didn't take the report seriously.

"Hopefully, we can get a better set of data and prevent more children from passing," said Giles, who said the bill would provide nationwide consistency in assessing and reporting fatalities.

Brown's office said the bill is also supported by organizations including the National Children's Alliance, Child Welfare League of America, Children's Advocacy Institute, Within Our Reach, and the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities. Brown urged people to report cases of child abuse or neglect to the National Child Abuse Hotline at-1-800-422-4453, local law enforcement, or child protective services offices.

Social-Emotional Learning Data May Identify Problems, But Can Schools Fix Them?

In one district, seeing survey data about school climate and students' self-perception of social and emotional strengths motivated educators to change their practices, a new report concludes. And that was true even though the survey results weren't used for high-stakes purposes, like teacher evaluations.

What's not known is whether the adjustments educators made effectively addressed the issues they were concerned about or whether they will move the needle on future survey results, says the report by Future Ed at Georgetown University.

The report comes at a time when researchers are exploring whether it's possible to consistently and reliably measure social-emotional learning by asking students about their own strengths in areas like relationship skills. Some have criticized such measures, including those explored in the report, saying they are prone to flawed responses or being "gamed" by educators seeking desirable results.

The report looks at the experiences of the Fresno Unified School District, part of the CORE districts, a group of California school systems that regularly survey students about social-emotional learning competencies, like social awareness. The districts also survey teachers, students, and parents about school climate issues, like safety.

"There's a good deal of research yet to be done, but what struck me was that, even in a low-stakes environment, just seeing data on social-emotional issues and school culture and climate conditions really has proven to be a substantial catalyst for educators on all levels of the district," said Future Ed director Thomas Toch, who co-authored the report. Those CORE district's measures were originally developed as part of a unique waiver from the requirements of No Child Left Behind. That federal law has since been replaced, and the waiver has lapsed, but the districts continue to administer the surveys.

"Fresno educators told us that merely by administering the annual surveys to students, educators, and parents and conveying the results to schools, the CORE districts have signaled the importance of social-emotional contributors to student success and have galvanized educators to act on problems the surveys surface," the Future Ed report says.

Governor, ODE exploring changes requiring schools to track vaping infractions

The results of our statewide survey revealed a 700% increase in the number of students caught vaping.

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine and the Ohio Department of Education are exploring potential changes requiring all schools to specifically track and report vaping infractions following a 3News investigation.

3News has been exploring the statewide vaping epidemic impacting teens all this month in our exclusive series called 'Clearing the Air.'

The results of our statewide survey, done in partnership with our sister stations in Columbus and Toledo, revealed a 700% increase in the number of students caught vaping.

But gathering that data wasn't easy because many schools did not specifically track vaping infractions. We reached out to more than 600 school districts across the state. In total, 450 school districts got back to us. Of those, 353 districts provided us with the number of vaping infractions that took place over the last three school years.

That's something DeWine and the Ohio Department of Education says needs to change.

"I think you did a great job reporting this and coming up with this information which I think is helpful in sparking a lot of discussions," said Mandy Minick, Deputy Director of Communications for the Ohio Department of Education. "One of the things that we are committed to doing is trying to help to make sure that we are keeping students safe, keeping them

healthy and out of danger. And so we agree with the governor's office that this is something that we need look at in Ohio at a statewide level."

Eve Mueller, Deputy Director of Communications for Gov. DeWine, added, "Gov. DeWine will work with State Superintendent Paolo DeMaria and the State Board to encourage better data collection around youth vaping and hopes the Board will change its policy to capture specific information about vaping disciplinary issues at Ohio schools. In addition, he will ask ODE to consider surveying schools to gather facts about vaping incidents to provide a current snapshot of the data."

Our 3News investigation revealed vaping incidents in schools rose from 773 to 6,400 over the past three school years.

"As a state, that's a concerning issue and we should try to have the tools to identify the problem," said Daniel Rambler, of Akron Public Schools.

Akron Public Schools is one of the many districts that gave us data for tobacco policy infractions, but could not give us data specific to vaping.

"For the state, that's incredibly important to do so that way it can be determined there's probably hot pockets of the area of the state where it's more prevalent and then how do you design prevention tools to those areas," Rambler said.

Copley-Fairlawn City Schools recognized the trend years ago and is already separating vaping infractions and tobacco infractions.

"We've been doing that since we started learning about vaping," said Aimee Kirsch, of Copley-Fairlawn City Schools. "If we encompass vaping along with tobacco usage we're not going to be to know how big of a problem is this and what we need to do to remedy the problem."

So what's the timeline for ODE's statewide survey?

The department is still in the planning phase of the project. 3News is told it will take at least a couple of months before there will be any preliminary data.