



No easy answer for EdChoice, fair school funding

By JULIE HULLETT

BEACHWOOD —Education experts said that the solution to funding EdChoice vouchers is a complex one, and it cannot be answered without taking a more broad look at fair school funding in Ohio. In a panel discussion at “EdChoice, vouchers and Ohio school funding: The issues and impact,” panelists explored these issues in depth and how the General Assembly is working through them.

The panel included Legislative Advocacy Specialist for the Ohio Association of School Business Officials Barbara Shaner, Secretary for Education and Superintendent of Schools for the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland Frank O’Linn, Education Policy Fellow at Innovation Ohio Stephen Dyer and Vice President of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute Chad L. Aldis. Patrick O’Donnell, an education reporter at The Plain Dealer, served as the moderator at the Feb. 25 forum, held at the Landmark Centre in Beachwood.

When pressed to say whether they supported the Ohio House’s version of EdChoice reforms or the Senate’s version, some panelists chose one while others said that both have flaws. Mr. Dyer said that he supports the house’s plan but said that one superintendent in Columbus phrased it as follows:

“If you’re offering me a house that used to be filled with smokers and a house that used to be filled with cats, I guess I’d take the cats.”

The house’s version is found in SB 89 and calls for an income-based system to determine what students are eligible for EdChoice vouchers, according to Mr. O’Donnell. In this proposal, the state would pay for the vouchers. In the senate’s version, found in HB 9, EdChoice eligibility is

still performance-based and uses a school's rating on the state report card, which is released by the Ohio Department of Education.

Mr. O'Donnell started off the panel by explaining that there were 255 public schools in the state in the 2018-19 school year that were considered "underperforming" and students were eligible to receive vouchers to attend private schools. That increased to 517 for the 2019-20 school year and will increase to 1,200 this fall. The legislature has been working to reduce the number of schools on the EdChoice list, Mr. O'Donnell said.

House vs Senate support

Ms. Shaner said that she supports the house's version of EdChoice reforms because it will end performance-based vouchers. If the state wants a voucher program, she said that the state should pay for it.

"We are sending some of our local funds along with state funds to pay for the vouchers," she said. "We do have a policy against the use of public funds to pay for private education, but obviously we're working within the reality that we have right now."

Attendee Robin Koslen, 67, said that there will be winners and losers when the legislature chooses a plan for EdChoice vouchers. Ms. Koslen is a resident of Cleveland Heights, where there is a 7.9-mill school levy on the ballot for the March 17 primary. The district paid \$7 million in vouchers last year.

Mr. O'Linn said that the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland is a large provider of choice and has all five EdChoice programs offered in Ohio at its diocese. Catholic schools are the largest nonpublic provider of education in Ohio, he said.

"Our stance is very much in favor of helping families and helping children and making sure that those who want to choose have the power to do so," he said. Neither the house nor senate plans address long-term funding issues in Ohio, according to Mr. O'Linn.

Mr. Aldis said that the Fordham Institute supports school choice, whether that is public, private, parochial, open enrollment or charter schools. The institute has advocated for an income-based model, he said, and supports a higher income threshold, which is currently at 200 percent of the poverty line. The house plan proposes 250 percent and the senate plan proposes 300 percent.

Cupp-Patterson for fair funding

The panelists agreed that despite their differing opinions on EdChoice, the larger issue at hand was how to fund schools in Ohio. Mr. Dyer said that public school districts are losing funds by paying for students who reside in their district to attend private schools. The public schools

cannot rely too heavily on property taxes, which he said has been deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Ohio, or the district can reduce its services.

“That’s really been the problem with this whole school choice issue,” he said. “It’s really masking the larger issue in the state of Ohio and that is that we have not properly funded our schools for 30 years.”

In June, state Reps. John Patterson, D-Jefferson, and Bob Cupp, R-Lima, introduced HB 305, which would create a new school funding formula that would determine state aid based on property values and resident wealth. So far, it was assigned to the Finance Committee. Ms. Shaner said that the Ohio Association of School Business Officials supports the Cupp-Patterson plan.

“This is not a radical idea,” Mr. Dyer said, emphasizing that the house should pass HB 305. “It’s just a matter of the state legislature stepping up to the plate and doing it.”

Report card reforms

The panelists also noted that the state report card grades, which they said are flawed, are at the heart of the funding issues. Mr. O’Donnell asked if it seems possible for state officials and legislators to agree on a better way to assess student achievement.

Ms. Shaner said that the Ohio Association of School Business Officials would accept a better standard than the one that is used now. She said that people do not have confidence in the report card anymore and it has caused “angst” in communities.

Attendee Krissy Klouda lives in the Willoughby-Eastlake City School District and is helping run the levy campaign for the primary.

“Just because the state of Ohio standards are unfairly written, and therefore saying that these schools are failing, doesn’t mean that they are,” she said.

According to Mr. Dyer, the problem with the state report card is that it is tied to test scores, which show a correlation with poverty levels. Students in wealthy communities tend to have higher scores, he said, referencing a recent Stanford University report.

Mr. O’Linn said that he “is amenable to the notion of accountable choice.”

“You won’t find me saying that schools should be able to take voucher revenue and not be held accountable,” he said. Mr. O’Linn added that non-public schools should be involved in the discussion to determine what the best standard for assessment is.

The application opens for EdChoice vouchers opens on April 1.