



TO: Members of the Ohio House Education and Finance Committees
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FROM: Eric Gordon
Ohio 8 Co-Chair
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Dr. Charlie Keenan
Chair, Governing Board
First Ring Schools Collaborative

DATE: June 11, 2021

RE: HB 290: Backpack Funding Legislation

CC: Member of the Alliance for High Quality Education(74 school districts)
Members of the First Ring Schools Collaborative (16 school districts)
Members of the Mid-Size Urban Leadership Collaborative (9 school districts)
Member of the Ohio 8 Coalition (8 school districts & 8 labor unions)

The Ohio 8 Coalition, the Alliance for High Quality Education, First Ring Schools Collaborative and the Ohio Midsized Urban Districts Leadership Collaborative write today regarding HB 290, or the “Backpack Bill.” This legislation would significantly expand and reconstruct Ohio’s voucher system by creating a tax-payer-funded scholarship for every student in Ohio, regardless of family wealth or school district performance. Our organizations have concerns about this bill for the following reasons.

- 1) **Unproven Model:** A statewide voucher system is a concept that is not proven to be beneficial for communities or students. The only state to even attempt such a broad disruption of traditional education is West Virginia, which will begin their program in the 22-23 school year. No other state offers a statewide program yet, so we cannot yet understand the effect it would have on the overall educational system. Without more evidence that a statewide voucher system works to the benefit of students, any attempt

to begin one now is premature. There is data, however, to indicate vouchers do not have the effect of improving student outcomes. [The National Council of State Legislators\(NCSL\)](#), [Economic Policy Institute](#), and even the [Thomas B. Fordham Institute](#) have all conducted research that outlines the lackluster impact of school vouchers. Specifically, that vouchers do not significantly improve student performance or growth.

- 2) **Taxpayer Accountability:** Traditional school districts know they are beholden to their local voters and taxpayers, and share financial outlooks and proposals accordingly, so voters can make decisions on how to support their schools based on that information. A statewide voucher system does not include accountability for funds approved by local voters. Instead, local and state public tax dollars may flow out of the community entirely, and tax payers are left uncertain of the benefit, if any, is accruing to their community. In a state that values local control and community self-determination, undermining this tax payer/school district relationship by extracting local funds runs counter to the purpose of local taxes and accepted community behavior.
- 3) **Outcomes Accountability:** In addition, since most private and parochial schools that receive these funds are not a part of the statewide report card system, any policy that shunts more students into these schools further erodes any degree of accountability. At a time when many remain concerned over how students are faring coming out of the pandemic and there is an earnest conversation about how to measure and report on accountability, any policy change that results in fewer accountability measures is a step backwards. Without evidence to show that vouchers improve students and building performance, expanding their reach statewide may harm students, rather than assist.
- 4) **Fiscal Accountability:** When public dollars are sent to nearly any institution, including traditional public schools, they are subject to multiple elements of budgetary and financial accountability and transparency. This includes, but is not limited to, public audits to ensure proper use of public funds; a minimum standard for fiscal health of the organization receiving those dollars; and ability for the public to request documents from the organization to help prove their fiscal health. A statewide voucher system sends public dollars to organizations that have no requirement to ensure those dollars are spent appropriately, thus setting up two different systems of accountability.
- 5) **Students with Disabilities:** Public schools are required by law to offer a wide range of free services to students who need extra or enhanced instruction, special services or equipment, or other educational accommodations. Private and parochial schools do not have those same requirements. In fact, private and parochial schools do not have to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) for things like wheelchair ramps, interpreters, aides, etc. and unless a student is participating in the Jon Peterson or Autism Scholarship programs, schools are under no obligation to accept student with disabilities or learning challenges, much less follow Individualized Education Plan (IEPs). Traditional public schools are proud to serve all types of students but doing so relies on a funding stream that does the same. Siphoning off taxpayer dollars to fund educational settings that are not required to recognize the panoply of student abilities in Ohio is unfair to all students.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. Although we will connect by telephone and email with your staff, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us through the Ohio 8 Coalition lobbyist Scarlett Boudier at Scarlett@advocacyandcommunication.org.

[The Ohio 8 Coalition](#) is a strategic alliance composed of the superintendents and teacher union presidents from Ohio's eight urban school districts – Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo, and Youngstown. The Ohio 8 Coalition's mission is to work with policy makers to improve academic performance, increase graduation rates and close the achievement gap for urban children throughout Ohio. The Coalition carries out its mission by working closely with legislators, educators, parents, labor, and community officials. The Coalition brings a shared administrator-teacher voice to help shape state education policy.

[The Alliance for High Quality Education](#) is an organization of sixty Ohio school districts – mostly high-performing, high tax effort, above average wealth districts – dedicated to the concept that school funding should be the State's number one priority, that education is the single, most important factor for ensuring sustained economic growth in the state, and that objectively determined, stable, adequate funding levels are the only way to guarantee appropriate educational opportunities for all of Ohio's youth and satisfy the state constitution's "thorough and efficient" clause.

[First Ring Schools Collaborative](#) Established in 2000, the First Ring Schools Collaborative (FRSC) is an association of 16 school districts that border the city of Cleveland, Ohio, serving more than 100,000 students combined. Our primary objective is to help First Ring School districts address interrelated challenges related to poverty, mobility, diversity, and the achievement gap. This work is focused through a strategic plan centered around four key areas: Essential Supports, Advocacy & Awareness, Collective Impact, and Governance & Sustainability.

[Ohio Mid-Sized Urban Districts Leadership Collaborative](#) The "Mid-Sized Urbans" are a group of schools serving Ohio's middle-sized urban areas (pop. 22,000-70,000). The group was formed as a means of collaboration and creative problem-solving for school leaders facing the common challenges of poverty. The group's mission is to increase academic opportunity and outcomes for all students attending Ohio's urban schools. In total, the Mid-Sized Urbans educate more than 40,000 students.