

VIEWPOINT: Keep Choice and Competition for our Kids

Ohio's education system is struggling. Only 70 out of every 100 public high school students in Ohio will graduate. We continue to spend more and more on our schools without getting any results. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress our test scores have floundered since 2000. With the exception of 4th grade math, students scoring proficient or better in math and reading in fourth and eighth grades have remained stagnant in the neighborhood of 35%.

In addition to poor test results, Ohio's students are also failing to learn what they need to know in order to excel in rigorous academic environments. 37% of first-time freshman in Ohio public colleges and universities needed remedial math and 20% needed remedial English.

Yet in the light of these staggering realities, Governor Strickland's recent budget proposal fails to seriously address these issues, and directly assaults two of the more promising education reforms Ohio has undertaken in recent years; charter schools and vouchers.

The governor's budget would completely eliminate funding for the EdChoice Scholarship program, a statewide tuition-voucher program currently awarding scholarships of up to \$5,000 to some 3,000 students enrolled in public schools that are judged to be in "academic emergency." Further, the budget is packed with provisions that would ultimately force charter schools in Ohio to shut down.

Arguing that charter schools have been a "dismal failure", the governor would prevent any new charter schools from opening until 2009, decrease per-pupil allotments to existing charter schools, and would ban for-profit businesses from operating charter schools altogether. By painting all charters with the broad brush of failure based on the actions of a few, the governor would deny over 76,000 Ohio students and their parents continued access to a variety of educational alternatives they have already been enjoying for a number of years.

The truth is that many charter schools are making a difference. A recent Fordham Foundation study indicated that since 2001-02, charter school proficiency rates have more than doubled, while rates in traditional schools have risen more slowly. In addition, the Buckeye Institute found that charter school students out performed students in traditional schools on six of nine academic measurements in math and reading.

No doubt, some charter schools have failed, and charter schools that fail academically or professionally should be put out of business. However, the many successful ventures that have been established should be allowed to continue to thrive. But under the governor's

plan, all charters would be deprived of the freedom to live up to their potential in terms of innovation and effectiveness, and their students would be sent packing to be trapped in failing public schools that, unfortunately, cannot be put out of business.

The governor also claims that “sacrifice and belt-tightening” are necessary in this two-year budget to get Ohio back on track. This may be true, but the \$13 million gained by cutting the EdChoice voucher program is pocket change compared to the total price tag for the entire budget of \$53 billion. It could be argued that investing this \$13 million in these kids could yield greater benefits for the state in the future in terms of these students’ chances to graduate from college, get a well-paying job, and pay back more in taxes over their lifetime than they ever took in the form of EdChoice vouchers. Is it really worth \$13 million to return these kids to failing schools?

Opposition to these cuts is growing and many parents and students have already started a campaign to hold on to their ability to have a choice in education. In public hearings with legislators, on the Internet, and through e-mail, parents and students are taking issue with the governor’s characterization of these programs as “wastefulness and giveaways.” Those who have experienced the benefits of choice under Ohio law understand how valuable it is, and they are beginning to fight to keep it.

The bottom line is that taking these programs away, despite their flaws, hurts many disadvantaged kids by sending them back into some of the worst schools in the state. This budget stifles innovation and competition by severely reducing educational choice in Ohio just at a time when Ohio needs to be looking forward, trying to find new and creative ways to build a highly educated and highly skilled workforce for the needs of the 21st century economy.